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BUILDERS OF MODERN INDIA

KANDUKURI VEERESALINGAM

D. ANJANEYULU

PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
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ABOUT THE SERIES

THE OBJECT of this series is to record, for the present and future generations, the story of the struggles and achievements of the eminent sons and daughters of India who have been mainly instrumental in our national renaissance and the attainment of independence. Except in a few cases, such authoritative biographies have not been available.

The biographies are planned as handy volumes written by knowledgeable people and giving a brief account, in simple words, of the life and activities of the eminent leaders and of their times. They are not intended either to be comprehensive studies or to replace the more elaborate biographies.

The work of writing these lives has to be entrusted to different people. It has, therefore, not been possible to publish the biographies in a chronological order. It is hoped, however, that within a short period all eminent national personalities will figure in this series.

Shri R. R. Diwakar is the General Editor of the series.

PREFACE

In his life, Veeresalingam had many distinctions to his credit. He was a pioneer in social reform and civic service, in journalism and literature, and in many other fields of activity in the region of his birth. He was a rare nation-builder. He was much ahead of his times.

It is hard for an Andhra, assigned to do his biography, not to go into ecstasies over his personality and achievement. But the temptation has to be resisted, if one wants to present his subject in the correct perspective. I hope I have done it, within my limits, and with all my limitations. It has been my constant endeavour to present his philosophy largely in his own words.

To be altogether dispassionate about his subject may not be easy for a biographer. Complete, clinical objectivity may be neither possible, nor even desirable. But it should not be impossible for him to be balanced in his approach and restrained in his judgment. If I have succeeded in presenting a balanced picture, my labour is well rewarded.

Madras

D.A.

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Dawn of The Modern Age

THE FIRST HALF of the nineteenth century could, in some ways, be said to mark the real beginnings in the history of modern Indian culture. It presaged the period of Renaissance to follow in the second half. It was during these years that the first impact of the West on the cultural front began to be felt all over the country, including the far west and the deep south. The epicentre was still in and around the College of William in Calcutta, but the rumblings could be heard nearabout Fort St. George in Madras and in the town of Rajahmundry on the bank of the Godavari in Andhra Pradesh. It was not long before the sound could reach the farthest corners of the Andhra region.

The Telugu-speaking areas, hitherto scattered in different bits, some under the Marathas and the Nizam, others under the Nawabs in the South, were in the process of attaining a political integrity of sorts, with the return of the Ceded Districts of Cuddapah, Kurnool, Bellary and Anantapur to the British Administration of the then Madras Presidency, including the Northern Circars. The transition of the foreign rulers from trade and commerce to civil administration, through military conquests, was nearing completion.

This region, along with the rest of the country, was just learning to enjoy the fruits of administrative stability under the protection of the new rulers whose writ was running far and wide. There was some sense of security in the countryside, after the Marquis of Hastings had put down the growing menace of

the thugs and the pindaris and other armed raiders, let loose after the disintegration of the Maratha power. Local chieftains (not excluding some of the biggest of them like Vasireddi Venkatdri Naidu in Guntur District) and warring Rajahs were gradually eliminated, and replaced by the representatives of the East India Company. Some of the newly-created zamindars were getting used to their status and perquisites, while the deposed rulers were almost reconciled to their inevitable lot. A semblance of contentment among the people, in general, could be seen, even if there was no marked prosperity, not to talk of the recurring famines controlled in due course.

With the slow decay of Indian industries and the natural curb on exports, a kind of village self-sufficiency was coming into being—leading one to make a virtue of necessity. The old social pattern of the Hindu community—the joint family and the caste system—was still intact. Religious practices of all kinds continued in the same old form, maybe with less of the true spirit of devotion than in the past. But there was nothing alarming, any way, unlike in the Bengal of Raja Ram Mohun Roy.

It was in the sphere of education and culture, however, that substantial changes and significant developments were indicated. With Macaulay's minute on education in 1835 plumping for the brave new world of Western learning, traditional modes of instruction in the Indian religious classics were soon to receive a setback. Widespread action at the governmental level was yet to await Sir Charles Wood's note (on the organisation of the public instruction departments), but private schools, run by grants-in-aid, were encouraged to spread the knowledge of English, whose utility for trade and employment began to be recognised. The three Presidency Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were to await the upheaval of 1857 and the Queen's proclamation for finding their priority in coming into existence.

The cultural situation marked a watershed between a continuation of the tradition, in a diluted form though, and the age

of experiment, for which the ground was being prepared. The times were obviously more conducive to the exercise of scholarship and critical acumen than to the expression of creative talent. The translation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntalam*, by Sir William Jones a generation earlier, and such other activity under the discerning patronage of the Sanskrit classics by Warren Hastings blazed the trail for a re-discovery of the Indian heritage from a new angle. This set the vogue for a critical re-examination of the great *kavyas* in the various regional languages, with learned commentaries. Their publication became comparatively easy with the installation of the printing presses at a few important centres, beginning with Serampore near Calcutta.

True it was, no doubt, that the earliest printing facilities in Telugu were secured by the Christian missionaries of the day for the propagation of their gospel among the people who did not know English rather than for the promotion of the cause of the regional language and literature as such. The first set of Telugu types were cast in the first decade of the century (about 1806 or so), facilitating the printing of books in the Telugu script. The earliest among them is known to be the *Sabdamanjari* (a beginner's dictionary of Sanskrit, still in use among the students) in 1827, followed by the *Andhra Nighantu* (Telugu dictionary) a few years later. The two useful dictionaries, *Andhra Deepika* (Telugu) and *Sabdaartha Kalpataru* (Sanskrit), by Mamidi Venkaiah of Machilipatnam were also compiled about this time.

A contemporary classic of this period was *Kasee Yatra Charitra* (printed in 1839) by Enugula Veeraswamayya, an eminent public figure of Madras, narrating his impressions of the manners and customs of the people of the different places he happened to have passed through, on his pilgrimage to Varanasi. Another fertile source of information on the life and times was represented by the local tracts (*Kaifiyat*), and other records, preserved in manuscripts, numbering many thousands, collected by Col. Colin Mackenzie of the Military Engineer Service, stationed in the

Ceded Districts. Some of the Telugu scribes, who were employed to aid him in his work, happened to be scholar-poets of some merit in their own right, like Kavali Venkata Borrayya, the author of the prose work, *Kancheepura Maahaatmyam*.

All this wealth of material was sorted out and carefully preserved in the archives of the College of Fort St. George (handed down, in due course, to what is now known as the Oriental Manuscripts Library in Madras) by a Madras civilian, Charles Philip Brown, who survives as a major literary figure in Andhra. Besides his original work on the compilation of the two great dictionaries of spoken Telugu, he was engaged, during this period, in the task of unearthing many little known and less-appreciated Telugu classics and bringing them to the notice of the literate public. He had already prepared a simplified Telugu grammar, like his predecessors A.D. Campbell and William Carey.

At no other time in the earlier history of Andhra was so much real groundwork done in the field of language and literature. This, along with the message of the Christian gospel, brought by the foreign missionaries, with the accent on the ethical aspect, served to create a new intellectual atmosphere, conducive to honest doubt and free discussion of the time-honoured rituals and practices in the Hindu society. This was all the more strengthened by the acquaintance with the elementary principles of the physical and natural sciences, which were soon to question the basic assumptions of Hindu belief and intuition by the new methods of observation and analysis, hypothesis and proof.

Here was indeed a challenge to an old culture from the new. And the mode of response to it was to determine the course of India's cultural renaissance in the various regions. In Bengal, under the far-seeing leadership of Raja Ram Mohun Roy, it took the form of a synthesis between the best features that could be adopted from Christianity with the most lasting elements from the *Upanishads*. In the Punjab, it was to take, at a later date, the form of a militant re-affirmation of one's faith in the essence of the

Vedas, under the banner of Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. In Maharashtra, it was to find a corresponding inspiration from the *Bhakti* cult, leading to a reform movement under the leadership of Mahadev Govind Ranade within the mainstream of the Hindu society. In Andhra, it took the form of a series of challenges under the evangelical fury of Veeresalingam.

Birth and Upbringing

THE TWO CITIES with which Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu had most to do in his eventful life were Rajahmundry, where he was born and where he spent the best part of his life, and Madras where he died after spending some of his later years. Rajamahendravaram (of which Rajahmundry has been a popular corruption) was a great centre of cultural activity in Andhra in the last century, besides being a place of historical importance, as the capital city of Raja Raja Narendra and other rulers of the eastern Chalukya dynasty. And Madras had been the political and administrative capital of the southern Presidency from the days of the East India Company till the linguistic reorganisation of the State after independence.

Veeresalingam was born in Rajahmundry on 16 April 1848 in a fairly prosperous middle class family of Niyogi Brahmins. As the name indicates, his ancestors had followed the Veera Saiva tradition of ritual and worship, to which he makes a reference in his autobiography. He was named after his paternal grandfather, who had held some position of responsibility under the zamindars of the day, making a name for himself by his charities and love of Sanskrit learning. Veeresalingam senior had two sons, Venkataratnam and Subbarayudu, of whom the latter was to beget the most illustrious member of the family. Grandson Veeresalingam was a frail and sickly child, who miraculously survived a severe attack of smallpox, which left its permanent scars on his face. Constantly harassed by chronic

asthma and colds, as well as dyspepsia, he was always fighting the battle for survival all through his life that well exceeded the biblical span.

Losing his father while he was only four years of age, Veeresalingam was brought up by his mother with the help of his paternal uncle. Of this lady of strong will, the grateful son had this to say in his autobiography :

“Although she was hot-tempered, self-willed and harsh of speech, she was, nevertheless, kind-hearted and benevolent, honest and courageous, firm and persevering in action. Her fits of anger were but fleeting and whenever she had quarrels with others, she forgot them soon after the incident and sought reconciliation by going out of her way to talk to them. Whenever the erstwhile foes were in trouble, she would go out of her way to help them on her own. She always fed those who came hungry at her doors, although in the process she herself had sometimes to go without food.

“Her self-will was so strong as to make her flare up, oft and on: “When I have a son who is the master of half the family property, what need have I to suffer insults at others’ hands and live a submissive and dependent life?”

The son was not unaware of the elements in his own make-up which he seemed to have inherited essentially from his mother. In fact, he said that in so many words:

“I have inherited some of her qualities. By nature, I am hot-tempered, although I appear mild on most occasions; I get angry too easily; when I see others do evil, I cannot hold my temper. I become harsh of speech. Often did I regret this, praying to God to cure me of this blemish; I tried to give it up several times; but it has never left me. What comes by birth does not perhaps change, however old and wise a man grows.”

Along with this short temper and feeble health of his, Veeresalingam had a remarkable sharpness of wit that more than made up for all his faults put together. There was practically no sub-

ject that he could not grasp at the first glance and it was with a refreshing freedom from conventional humility that he described himself as an *Ekasanthagraahi* (literally one who grasps at the first glance—‘quick on the uptake’ or ‘a man of high I.Q.’ in modern parlance).

Like most boys of his day, he was put through the mill of a *paiyal* school (a rather indifferent one at that) for learning the three R’s. He got acquainted with the school boy’s Telugu classics like *Rukmini Kalyanam* and *Andhra Naama Sangraham*, *Sumati Satakam* and *Krishna Satakam*, not having made much headway with the Sanskrit *Bala Ramayanam* and *Amara Nighantu*. He was hardly twelve, when he was apprenticed to one of his relatives in government service (where he might hope to be able to follow him) before joining the Government District School in 1860 for acquiring modern education.

At school, Veeresalingam did uniformly well in all the subjects, including English, Arithmetic and Geography, not to speak of Telugu, winning prizes for high marks as well as distinction for general behaviour and free scholarships from year to year. Telugu was his favourite subject, understandably so, having regard to the main line of his future work. He had an unequalled passion for reading, especially the Telugu literary classics. For savouring the delights of *Vasu Charitra* (of which he could not afford to buy a copy for its price of over four rupees) he had to play truant from school, so that he might be able to save the half-rupee every month which he contracted to pay the shopkeeper by way of rent for reading the book in the shop itself.

It will be of interest to have an idea of his mode of living and thinking, while he was in his early teens. He says in his autobiography :

“Ever since I had my *Upanayanam* (sacred thread ceremony), I performed my *sandhyavandanam* (ceremonial prayer by dawn and dusk) regularly at the right hour and repeated *Gayatri Mantram* with the greatest devotion, always a hundred times. Often I went in the evening to the Goda-

vari, where I offered oblation to the setting sun.... Every *Ekadasi*, I remained without food till nightfall; and on the *Sivaratri* day I observed fast for the whole day.... In those days I was fond of reading about wars and penance (*tapas*). While reading of the great powers of the *rishis*, I longed to do penance myself and acquire similar powers. My favourite studies in the *Mahabharata* were *Uttara Gograhanam* in *Virata Parva*, *Bhishma*, *Drona*, *Karna* and *Salya Parvas*. In *Bhagavatam*, I enjoyed reading the seventh and the tenth cantos."

Which should be more than enough for giving the reader an inkling into the fact that while his upbringing was orthodox and his range of reading conventional, his literary tastes were his own and markedly on the side of personal heroism and the achievement of great deeds by courage and determination. His predilections in this direction were even more definitely pronounced, in the following passage :

".....During this period, my craze for reading the *Puranas* was on the increase. Whenever I read that Viswamitra made his own special creation to rival that of Brahma, that Agastya took the ocean and its contents, the whole lot of it, in a single mouthful, that Kapila reduced the sixty thousand sons of Sagara to ashes merely by a sharp glance of his eyes, and whenever I came across stories of such psychic powers achieved through penance, my heart would leap with excitement and I would long for the day when I could perform such great *tapas* and acquire equally great powers."

When we note that his earliest models in his spiritual aspiration were Viswamitra, Agastya and Kapila, we should have little difficulty in having a measure of the man in the making and envisaging his divine rage at injustice and wrongdoing in any shape and form. If he were not so angry he could, not have been, perhaps, so effective or purposeful either.

An incident which occurred in his school during this period would illustrate this point. The headmaster of the school was

found by the pupils not up to the mark in teaching English and they contemplated making a representation to the higher authorities to replace him by a more competent one. The headmaster, who came to know of the conspiracy against him, contrived to take possession of the memorial through a weak-kneed pupil, and made him play a traitor to fellow students. He gave the student leader severe chastisement in the class.

Veeresalingam was enraged at this act of high-handedness, despite the fact that he happened to be a favourite pupil of the headmaster and had nothing personal against him. He pursued the matter till the end. Not only was the representation made to all the educational authorities concerned, but the whole student community went on a strike, forcing the school to remain closed for several days. Veeresalingam did not rest content till the government ordered an enquiry into the affair, and replaced the erring headmaster by a more competent one. This was probably one of his earliest experiments in the fight against injustice wherever he found it.

As was common in his days, Veeresalingam was married quite early in his life. A school-going boy, hardly thirteen years of age, become groom to a bride of nine. Her original name was Bapamma. This was changed by his mother, who might have felt that the name was rather commonplace, to the better-sounding name Rajyalakshmi, by which she was known afterwards. Soon after the marriage, Veeresalingam became a householder. This points to a friction between his mother and paternal uncle's wife and the joint family had necessarily to be split up against his own will. It was also much to the dislike of his paternal uncle, who always had a soft corner for him and continued to take interest in his nephew's welfare till his death a few years later.

Owing to disputes about family affairs and property matters, besides his own prolonged illness. Veeresalingam's studies were interrupted more than once and his school-career was rendered less bright than was warranted by his natural intelligence.

He had finished his school and passed the Entrance Examination, qualifying him for admission to a college, in 1870, when he was nearly 22, an age at which most people would now be graduates or even double graduates.

By the time he left school, Veeresalingam had qualified for ministerial service under the government. He would have succeeded in getting in as a writer in the Court of the District Judge who took kindly to him but for the *Sheristadar*, a relative of his, who chose to let him down. But, far from regretting this failure, he looked upon it as a veritable blessing in disguise. He was thus spared of the dismal prospect of an official career that would have kept him away from the natural pursuit—which lay in the realm of literature—whether it be writing or teaching.

He had already started literary composition, on his own, while still at school. The first *kavya* he attempted was called *Suddhaandhra Niroshthya Nirvachana Naishadham* (a story of Nala in pure Telugu verse of non-labial words) and the second *Rasika ana Manoranjanam*. In his later years, he did not think much of these early attempts at strenuous versification. Nor of the other two which came later—the *Gopala Satakam* and the *Markandeya Satakam*. He preferred to dismiss them as juvenile efforts, best left forgotten.

III

Choice of a Career

VEERESALINGAM HAD THREE different occupations for him to choose from, when he finished his formal schooling and decided to settle down to a professional career. They were: 1) clerical service in the Revenue or Judicial Administration; 2) practice of law; and 3) teaching.

After passing his Entrance Examination, and even before that, he qualified himself for the first category of jobs by passing a number of tests. Around 1866 he got through a general test qualifying candidates for government jobs with a salary of Rs. 20 a month. During the years 1872 and 1875, he passed a number of other tests—Civil, Criminal and Revenue—and those relating to Translation and Precis Writing. But he set his face against clerical or other services under the government, which, he feared, would leave him little by way of individual freedom for the development of his personality.

For a time he toyed with the idea of becoming a lawyer, whose profession is supposed to be independent. He was about to appear for the Higher Grade Civil Test, which would have qualified him for a First Grade Pleadership. But he decided against it, after watching some of his friends in that line, who had led him to the conclusion that it was neither possible to be independent nor to make money while remaining truthful. Therefore he finally chose the teaching line, “where there was little occasion for sinning”.

Early in 1871, Veeresalingam was appointed to the post of

Junior Assistant in the Government District School at Rajahmundry on a salary of Rs. 25, with the help of its Headmaster, Kuppuswami Sastri. This job lasted only a year, but the young teacher was able to make an impression on the pupils and colleagues alike by his efficiency, integrity and discipline. Among the subjects he taught were English, Arithmetic and Indian History. In his iron discipline, he was no respecter of persons. One of his pupils, a younger brother of another teacher in the same school, who was apt to be treated indulgently by others, could not escape punishment at Veeresalingam's hands for his misbehaviour. The same pupil, after entering college in Madras, bore no grudge against his old teacher, but wrote to him as follows:

"I am doing well in the college and may, by God's grace, expect to pass F.A. this year with the little bit of knowledge I have, of which, the foundation was laid by you, whom I cannot but revere ever in my life."

His next job was that of the Headmaster of the English School at Korangi (a small town not far from Rajahmundry), on a monthly salary of Rs. 25. His brief tenure of two years here, which was otherwise uneventful, was notable for two incidents that have a bearing on his philosophy of life in general. He shocked the susceptibilities of the local tradition-bound elders, connected with the school, by arriving to take up his new job on an *Amavasya* day (considered inauspicious by the Andhras, who follow the lunar computation for their calendar, unlike their neighbours, the Tamils, who follow the solar system). But, the growing non-conformist, Veeresalingam, did not budge an inch from his stand. He maintained that one day was as good as another; all days of the calendar owe their existence to the self-same creator. He was ready to argue it out to the end, with the aid of his knowledge of astronomy, astrology and allied subjects, and the others came round to his point of view.

The second incident was even more interesting. This relates to his first direct encounter with one who claimed to be an expert

in the art of black magic. His old mother was, at that time, harried by the fear of ghosts and she hoped to get some relief from a visiting Yogi, ostensibly, of great powers in this direction. He was a well-fed and bearded young man with a voracious appetite that impressed Veeresalingam more than anything else. Veeresalingam had no faith in his occult powers, and had to let him in, merely out of deference to his mother's wishes. But the visitor's arrogant ways were too much for him and he would not agree to satisfy his unlimited greed for making easy money. This incensed the 'Yogi' who threatened to curse Veeresalingam. This threat was treated by the target with the contempt it deserved.

The result of this encounter was almost like the old story—'The biter bit'. The angry Yogi found himself at the receiving end and, after falling seriously ill himself, beat an ignominious retreat, a sadder and weaker man. Veeresalingam took pity on him, purely on humanitarian grounds, and sent him away with some cash and new clothes.

In 1874, Veeresalingam shifted his venue of activity to Bhavaleshwaram (spelt Bhowleswaram in the old days), six kilometres from Rajahmundry, where he was appointed Headmaster of the Anglo-Vernacular School. The salary was Rs 44 a month, which must have meant a big jump from the last figure of Rs. 25 at Korangi. But this was not the main attraction for a man who was eager to extend his area of work.

It was during his stay at Dhavaleswaram that Veeresalingam laid out for himself the path that he was to follow in the years to come. His interest in women's education, which lay dormant until then, found its first tangible expression here. Besides speaking and writing on this problem, which was to engage his attention till the end of his life, he started a girls' school here, with the help and co-operation of like-minded friends of the locality. He made his friend, Malladi Atchanna Sastri, headmaster of this school.

This was one of the earliest attempts at promoting the cause

of women's education, in a practical way, by the individual enterprise of a private citizen in the Andhra region.

It was during this period that Veeresalingam started a monthly journal *Vivekavardhini* (literally meaning incentive to wisdom), which was to play a significant role in influencing the social ideas of the day. He also gave his first exercise in *ashtaavadhaanam* (a *tour de force* of extempore versification, along with versatile scholarship and display of ready wit, which was performed by all the poets who wanted to establish their reputation) before an admiring circle of friends. However, he decided not to repeat it more than once thereafter.

While still at Dhavaleswaram, Veeresalingam was invited by his friend, Basavaraju Gavarraju, to attend the inaugural meeting of the Rajahmundry Provincial Social Club. He not only became a member of the Club, but delivered many lectures on Unity of Religions and other subjects there. It was at this forum that a lasting friendship was forged between Veeresalingam and Gavarraju, who was to be his righthand man in many of his future activities.

Two years later, in 1876, Veeresalingam had to sever his connection with the Dhavaleswaram School, following differences of opinion with a member of the Board of Management, which seemed inevitable in view of his own uncompromising nature. He was, however, glad to be back in Rajahmundry, though without a regular job on hand.

Before the end of the year, he was offered the post of Junior Telugu Assistant at the local Government School on a pay of Rs 25 by the Headmaster, Metcalfe. He was initially reluctant to accept this job (possibly because of the lower pay, after considerable experience elsewhere), but was soon reconciled to it. He was happy to serve in Rajahmundry, which would be the main centre of activity for the best part of his working life

Journalism and Public Life

VEERESALINGAM'S RETURN TO Rajahmundry in 1876 marks the beginning of a new phase in his career, when the school-master became an active journalist. The intrepid spirit of a young man with a sense of mission could not obviously be kept down by his unexciting routine of a junior Telugu Assistant. Despite his frail physique and feeble health, he was able to tap his unsuspected reserves of energy for his monthly publication, *Vivekavardhini*. He was soon able to convert this into a fortnightly.

Impressed by the progress of the *Vivekavardhini*, a friend of his at Narasapur, Shujayat Ali Khan had merged with it his own paper, the *Vidvan-Manoharini*. That was some time in 1875. The first few issues of the *Vivekavardhini* were printed in Madras at the press of the *Andhra Bhasha Sanjivani*, a Telugu periodical edited by Kokkonda Venkataratnam Pantulu, then Senior Telugu Pandit at the Presidency College. Very soon, however, Veeresalingam, in partnership with some friends, who invested a few hundred rupees each, set up a press of his own at Rajahmundry.

Obviously, Kokkonda and Kandukuri could not have got on too well with each other for any considerable length of time. These two held diametrically opposite views on problems relating to women's education, age of marriage and the like. One was a staunch upholder of the Hindu social tradition, in all its rigi-

dity, while the other was soon to question its basic postulates as understood from the rituals and superstitions of the day.

It did not take long for their differences of ideology and approach to deteriorate into a personal campaign of invective and slander against each other. Kandukuri's *Vivekavardhini* was perhaps the answer to Kokkonda's *Sanjivani*. When Kokkonda started a humorous magazine, *Hasya Vardhani* (the ending is significant) as an adjunct to the *Sanjivani*, *Veeresalingam* replied with the counterblast, *Hasya Sanjivani*, in July 1876. Started first as a separate unit, it was later incorporated in the body of *Vivekavardhini* and began to appear as a supplement.

Kokkonda's wrongheaded arguments against the education of women, seriously meant, were answered by Kandukuri's light-hearted arguments against the education of men. They were first published in *Kodu Bhasha Sanjivani* (obviously a parody of his rival's *Andhra Bhasha Sanjivani*—'Kodu' referring to a hill tribe, suggesting the primitive character), which was for some time a regular feature of *Hasya Sanjivani*.

The tongue-in-the-cheek arguments would run thus :

"Our ancestors were never guilty of education. So, it is against our tradition to get educated. Education would lead to forgery and false records. Were our ancestors ever known to have been handicapped for want of education? Not to all. They were, on the other hand, happy and long-lived. The present generation is becoming shortlived by its failure to follow their example. Is it not our duty to be true to our ancestors and resist the Government's attempt to start schools and corrupt our youth?"

The basic idea of journalism, as practised by Veeresalingam, could be understood from a glance at an early issue of *Vivekavardhini*. It had, for its motto, a short stanza from the Telugu version of the *Mahabharata*, which says :

"Whatever they might do, it is better for you not to do unto others what you would not be done by."

It could easily be approximated to the Biblical saying :

“Do unto others as you would be done by.”

In embarking on this venture, its founder had two main aims in view: the improvement of the Telugu language, which he hoped to do by writing in an easy, simple and chaste style; and, the improvement of the life of the people in general by working for the removal of the pernicious customs prevalent in the society and by raising their moral standards.

It follows, as a corollary, that social reform would be the third objective, necessarily involved in this. Even practices cannot be eradicated unless and until people realised the superiority of moral character to the externals of conventional religion. The expounding of the true doctrines of religion would, therefore, be the fourth.

The sense of public spirit and personal morality that informed the work of Veeresalingam as a journalist in particular, and as a member of the society in general, could be understood from the following lines in his autobiography :

“Wherever I come across a wrong done, it is not in my nature to put up with it in silence. I shall have no peace of mind, until I found a remedy for it.

“I can bear any amount of pain when it afflicts me, but when it is inflicted on others for no fault of theirs, I cannot put up with it. When others get into trouble on my account, I can hardly describe how grieved at heart I feel.

“It has been my firm conviction, from the outset, that morality was vital for the practice of religion. It is impossible for an immoral person to be a true devotee of God. To earn His grace, one must be pure at heart and spotless in character.”

Given this personal temperament and this set of social convictions, no journalist is likely to find his path strewn with roses. Veeresalingam was no exception. His path was full of thorns and thistles.

Countless were the evils rampant in the semi-feudal society of that period. The public services at the local level were corrupt to the core and bribery was the order of the day. Graft

bore no stigma among the officials—judicial or executive. Immorality had the sanction of fashion in the shape of nautch parties and professional dancing girls as concubines. These had the patronage of the rich and the powerful. Child marriages were held sacrosanct and the plight of young widows was taken for granted by the parents, relatives and others alike. Meaningless rituals passed for religion and semi-literate priests were accepted as the spiritual leaders by the illiterate and semi-literate masses. It was, therefore, a Herculean task that confronted the youthful editor of *Vivekavardhini*.

He realised the need of the hour, in concentrating his attention on local issues; he was also fully aware of the risks he was running in doing this. It was more dangerous then to tread on the corny toes of the local satraps than to tilt against the Queen Empress or her lofty proconsuls in the Indian capital of Calcutta, which was far away.

We might now be tempted to think of him as indulging in the politics of the parish pump, but he knew what he was up against. Commenting on the problem, he wrote in one of the earliest issues of *Vivekavardhini* :

“.....If bribery is condemned, the local satraps would be offended; if concubinage is denounced, the gay lotharios would be outraged; if outmoded customs are discouraged, the unlettered masses would feel unhappy; and if ostentatious rituals are disapproved of, as going against the true spirit of religion, the priests and preceptors would be mightily displeased. If the journal were to prove true to its self-chosen mission, it must needs offend such a wide variety of vested interests.”

Almost the very first evil attacked by Veeresalingam in the journal was that of nautch dances and debauchery, which gained respectability in the nocturnal parties held at the houses of judicial officers and lawyers. Even the ill-paid and needy subordinates had to cough up a pretty penny or two for these bacchanalian feasts, if they hoped to be in the good books of their bosses. The names of the “romantic” gentry, who flaunted their extra-

marital alliances in courts and public offices, were singled out for ridicule in direct and indirect ways.

The more sensitive among the victims began to tread their paths warily and the more penitent among them chose to mend their ways. No patron of the nautch-girls could afford to be so brazenfaced after the advent of this campaign as he used to be before. The institution began to lose its respectability, as the patrons began to lose face. This was a prelude to its inglorious but logical end some decades later under the impact of public opinion, asserting itself through legislation in the composite Madras State.

Another campaign, conducted by him in his paper, causing a minor sensation in those days, related to the practice of granting the pleader's *sanad* (certificate) to candidates, without the requisite qualifications, by certain judicial authorities in Rajahmundry. It was not unusual for experienced 'writers' and other assistants in the lawyers' offices to be granted these *sanads*, enabling them to practice in the courts, on the recommendation of the District Munsiff concerned.

The District Judge, an Englishman in those days, was the authority competent to grant the *sanads*, on the advice of the subordinate judiciary. The then *Sheristadar*, who happened to be more greedy than his predecessors, found it profitable to run a regular trade in *sanads*. Out of the various candidates, duly attested by their respective lawyers and put up for approval at the District Judge's level, this *Sheristadar* would pick out only such of them as had taken care to pay him the *mamool* (illegal gratification) in advance, leaving the others to take care of themselves.

Under this arrangement about ten persons were enrolled as pleaders in the District Judge's court and nearly seventy in the various District Munsiffs' Courts. It was enough of a scandal by itself, but it was made worse by the outcry of the unsuccessful candidates, who did not get the *sanads* for no other reason than the one mentioned above.

On coming to know of all these details, Veeresalingam felt

scandalised by the sordid business. He was not sorry that some had failed to obtain what they were not entitled to. He was angry at the corruption that had vitiated the entire transaction from beginning to end. He was not happy about the behaviour of the British District Judge, one Wallace, who had not put his foot down, when the matter was brought up to him, though he himself might not have been personally guilty of corruption. Despite the complaints that reached him, he did nothing to undo the mischief or check the activities of the *Sheristadar*, who was the villain of the piece.

All the facts of the case, as far as Veeresalingam could get verified from reliable sources, exposing the guilty, were duly published in the pages of the *Vivekavardhini*. The general public, as well as the lawyers and their assistants and the judiciary, stood aghast at these revelations. The *Sheristadar*, however, still seemed to put up a brave face on it. He managed to have a summons served on the Editor of the journal to present himself in person before the District Judge, which he promptly did, despite the trepidation within. He stood his ground firmly and declined to answer questions put to him by the Judge about the authorship of the impugned article in the absence of a legal obligation to do so.

The District Judge could do nothing in the matter, though he wanted to proceed against Veeresalingam, for contempt of court and sought the advice of the District Magistrate, which was not favourable. In the meantime, orders were received from the High Court, who were seized of this matter, to cancel all the *sanads* so far granted by the District Judge. Those who had already appropriated the *sanads* found themselves robbed of their gift and nursed a lifelong grievance against Veeresalingam. But the public were happy about the end of the scandal, for which they were thankful to the Editor of the *Vivekavardhini*.

This was followed by yet another incident, also connected with the corruption of the subordinate judiciary in different forms, which remains a *cause celebre* in the history of Rajahmundry and in the life of Veeresalingam as a journalist. Not a few of the District Munsiffs of those days took bribes from the contending parties,

almost as a matter of course and delivered their judgments accordingly.

A particular incumbent to that office (by name P. Sriramulu) followed an interesting practice, as vividly recounted by Veeresalingam in his autobiography. In arguing their cases before the Munsiff in Court, it was usual then, as now, for the *vakils* to cite relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code or the Indian Evidence Act (or other appropriate legal authority) as 100 I.P.C., 150 I.P.C., 200 C.R.P.C. and so on. By force of practice, these references were simplified to 100, 125, 150, 175, 200 etc., without any letters at all, as they were implied and correctly understood in the context.

But under this District Munsiff, who was to gain a lot of notoriety, these tell-tale numbers had assumed a sort of mystic significance. They did not relate to the I.P.C. or C.R.P.C. or any other code known to the students of law but to the respective bids in rupees which the rival parties were ready to pay the presiding judicial officer by way of consideration for buying him over to their side. The highest bidder (indicated by the number of the section cited in his favour) was naturally expected to win the case. This code language was well understood, as between the lawyers and the District Munsiff, but was not equally obvious to the general public.

As though this were not enough, by itself, to outrage the judicial conscience, the same District Munsiff was given to another practice, no less objectionable in the administration of justice. Finding it too much of a needless bother to write judgments on his own, he used to rely, for this job, on the Government Pleader (who happened to be his wife's brother in this instance), who would write them in rough draft, for the Munsiff to copy out in the fair and read out in the open court. Most of the lawyers knew this for a fact, but none of them had the guts to protest against it in public or expose it effectively. It was left for Veeresalingam to do the unpleasant job of exposure in the columns of *Vivekavardhini*. But it was not so simple for him this time. It proved a lot more complex than anyone could have imagined, and a lot more

dangerous to some individuals involved here.

Before impugning the honesty of the officials concerned, Veeresalingam took the precaution of making sure of his ground, arming himself with incriminating evidence of an incontrovertible sort. He got hold of two baskets of waste paper thrown out from the residence of the Government Pleader. After a laborious process of sifting and sorting, he was able to piece them together into two or three sheets, which turned out to be the rough of drafts of judgments prepared by the Government Pleader for the benefit of his relative and collaborator in this nefarious transaction—the District Munsiff.

Though some of the papers from the dustbin collected by Veeresalingam were lost by the betrayal of trusted friends, there were still just enough of them left to enable him to bring the offenders to book. Despite a series of attempts by the Government Pleader, known for his crafty ways, to turn the tables against Veeresalingam and clear himself of the charge, he was unable to hoodwink the latter and escape the clutches of law. He failed in his repeated attempts to outwit his opponent by getting back much of the waste paper so that he might be able to destroy the evidence.

This District Judge, who enquired into the case, found all the officials involved in this affair guilty. In the result, the *Sheristadar* and the criminal Record keeper lost their jobs. The former became insane, in a state of destitution. A worse fate was in store for the Government Pleader, who committed suicide to escape the oboquy. The District Munsiff met a similar end before the result of the enquiry could be made public.

Veeresalingam was sorry, purely on human grounds, at the unhappy turn of events. But the firm stand on justice that he took was vindicated, reinforcing his belief in the efficacy of truth. He knew that truth was more powerful than the limbs of law and all the other minions of governmental office. For the confirmed theist that he was, it only served to strengthen his belief in Providence and for the conscientious journalist, it enhanced the confidence in the success of his mission.

First steps in Social Reform

VEERESALINGAM'S INTEREST IN social reform was almost as old as his belief in a just and benign Providence. If all were equal in the eyes of the Creator, there could be no room for inequality or injustice in human society. Whether it was as a schoolmaster or as a journalist, his general outlook on society and his basic approach to its problems were the same. Reason and commonsense were his staff and torch in his march along the road of progress. When he believed something to be right, he did not hesitate to speak it out in public. His expressions were never at variance with his beliefs. For him, to think was to act. He made full use of the method of example as well as that of precept. Here was a perfect harmony of thought, word and deed.

There is no evidence to show that Veeresalingam was directly influenced by any particular teacher or preacher in his ideas of social reform. He no doubt kept the windows of his mind open on all sides, but the winds that blew from afar were neither so strong nor so frequent as they tended to belong to a generation or two later. Bengal had already taken the lead in some directions, with Maharashtra following close behind, but their impact on Andhra does not seem to have been immediate or considerable in the seventies of the last century. Veeresalingam's spirit of reform was largely an expression of his innate sense of justice, fairplay and human dignity evolved through the years.

Even before his return to Rajahmundry (as a junior Telugu Assistant in the Government School) in 1876, Veeresalingam happened to speak once under the auspices of the Association for Social Reform, started by his friend, B. Gavarraju. He spoke again, once or twice under the same auspices presumably in very general terms before the campaign for reform could take a definite shape. Soon after his return to Rajahmundry, he formed the Prarthana Samaj in his own house, on the initiative of some of his close friends. They used to meet once a week to hear him speak on the need for a mode of prayer, without resort to idol worship and the importance of purity in personal life. The public outside began to get interested in the meeting of the Samaj and women as well as men began to benefit from it in due course.

Veeresalingam and his youthful friends tried their hand at comparatively minor measures of social reform, to begin with. They related mostly to post-puberty marriages for girls, inter-dining and inter-marriage among the different sects of the Brahmin community, less primitive and more hygienic ways of disposal of dead bodies and the like. The results were none too encouraging.

It was on the suggestion of a close friend of his (by name Challapalli Bapaiah Pantulu) that he began to think of the problem of remarriage of virgin widows for the first time in 1879. A few years earlier, he had, no doubt, heard of a pamphlet by Mahamahopadhyaya Paravastu Rangacharya, an eminent classical scholar, who had found adequate support in the Hindu *sastras* for the remarriage of widows. This question was raised in the Telugu periodical, *Purushartha Pradayini*, published from Machilipatnam. The *Tattwa Bodhini* also favoured an open discussion of this problem. The books on the subject, written by Pandit Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar of Bengal, had not yet been available to Veeresalingam.

The paper written in Telugu by Rangacharya was of some use to him. Citing the authority of several *smritis* in favour of its main argument, the paper said :

“.....This shows that remarriage of women is sanctioned, beyond any question, by the *Srutis* (the Vedas), the *Smritis* (the sacred books of the Hindu Lawgivers) and the practices of wise men. It might, of course, be argued on the opposite side that it should not be practised in this Yuga, since it is mentioned among the acts forbidden in the Kaliyuga. This prohibition cannot be held to be superior, in its applicability, to the duty enjoined in the *Parasara Smriti*, as the latter is the authority to be followed. It could only have referred to the times when it was made, which were so unsettled, that any tyrant might put to death the husband of any goodlooking woman and marry her on some pretence, and get away with it. A contingency of this kind being ruled out under a government like that of the British, remarriages might now be performed with no let or hindrance....”

Veeresalingam took full advantage of these points, but also took care to marshal his arguments afresh, from a perusal of the different *Smritis*, like those of Manu, Yagnavalkya and Parasara, improving them effectively by a liberal interplay of his own wits. His dialectical powers were seen at their best in the first lecture on this subject he delivered at the Vijayanagaram Girls' School in Rajahmundry on August 3, 1879.

With his experience as a teacher and as a journalist, and generally as a man of the world, Veeresalingam was able to streamline his arguments on the subject to the needs of his mixed listeners. He sought to appeal to those who had an implicit faith in the authority of the Vedas as well as those who arrived at their conclusions through the logical process of reasoning. To the latter, he said that there were many instances in man's history in which an evil practice, with no intrinsic merit to commend itself, came to be regarded as a good one, by force of custom and usage. But the conclusions of sound logic could not, on that account, be ignored by those who would pursue truth at all costs. Women had the feelings and passions as well as the urges of sex no less than men. Sages like Viswamitra

and Parasara were unable to control these natural urges, though they were reputed to have lived on air and water. How then could we expect ordinary mortals to do it?

The unnatural practice of enforced widowhood had led the society into evils like abortion and infanticide. To those who believed in the orthodox tradition, he invoked the authority of the Vedas and the *Smritis*, with the commentary of Vidyaranya and others, which was favourable to him. From the *Puranas*, he cited the story of Arjuna marrying the widow, Uluchi, which pointed to the prevalence of the custom in ancient India.

The open discussion of this subject, which was taboo till then, caused a sensation among the Hindu public, not only of Rajahmundry but also of other important towns of Andhra. The students and the youth of the locality gave a hearty response to Veeresalingam's exposition of the problem and rallied vigorously in his support.

The diehard sections of the community were utterly scandalised. They mustered all their strength to defeat him in his arguments, getting ready even to beat him up, where the arguments might fail. But they never got their chance. The loyal students always followed their favourite teacher, forming a protective ring around him wherever he went out on his public campaigns. The traditionalists who revealed themselves as the hypocrites that he had long suspected them to be, only waited for a chance to wreak vengeance on him at any cost.

Nothing daunted Veeresalingam began to spread his campaign wider and wider by addressing more and more meetings on the subject. He delivered his second public lecture on the subject in Rajahmundry on 17 October 1879. Here he replied to all the points of criticism raised by his opponents against his first lecture, publishing the arguments and the counter-arguments in *Vivekavardhini*. A few days later, he went to Kakinada, a neighbouring town in the district, where he addressed a meeting on the same subject at the Hindu High School.

The local protagonists of the orthodox tradition left no stone unturned in their attempt to beat him in the debate and send him back in disgrace. They did not succeed, though. In fact, they took to the argument by stone, as a last resort, in which also they emerged the second best. Their leader was overpowered and taught the lesson of his life by a group of students from Rajahmundry, who formed the bodyguard for Veeresalingam.

This was neither the first nor the last experience of this kind for Kandukuri. The Sankaracharya of Virupaksha Pitham (from Visakhapatnam) who was on a visit to Rajahmundry, along with his party, chose discretion as the better part of valour, when some of his more ardent disciples tried to bring him into clash with Veeresalingam on the issue of Sastriic approval for the remarriage of widows.

Veeresalingam and a few of his trusted friends formed themselves into an active group, called the Widow Remarriage Association (WRA). The friends included Basavaraju Gavarraju, Eluri Lakshminarasimham, Bayapanedi Venkata Jogaiah, Kannamreddi Parthasarathi Naidu, Chirravuri Yajnanna Sastri and Kaja Ramakrishna Rao. Other friends like Kommu Ramalingam Sastri joined it later. This was probably the first organisation of its kind in Andhra.

Some five years earlier a similar association was started by a few high-placed non-officials in Madras City with P. Chentsal Rao as Secretary and Dewan Bahadur Raghunatha Rao and others as members. But it was a short-lived affair, nothing being heard about its activities after a couple of years. Besides, Veeresalingam was not kept in touch with its origin or progress, presumably because of his humble station in life. The physical distance between Madras and Rajahmundry might have also been a real inhibiting factor in those days of primitive conditions of transport.

The campaign set afoot by the WRA in Rajahmundry soon began to gather momentum. They started with more enthusiasm

than experience. Their burning faith in the cause was greater than their economic resources. But help was forthcoming from unexpected quarters.

Two liberal-minded gentlemen by name Baru Raja Rao Pantulu and Pydah Ramakrishnaiah of Kakinada, who happened to visit Rajahmundry, promised to help them with amounts upto Rs 30,000 when the need arose. Men of high education like Nyayapati Subba Rao Pantulu, a promising young lawyer, Kanchi Krishnaswami Rao Pantulu, the Subordinate Judge at Kakinada, Atmuri Lakshmi Narasimham, the District Munsiff and Somanchi Bhimasankaram, among others, began to evince a keen interest in this movement.

All this was a much needed shot in the arm for Veeresa-lingam and his colleagues, who were itching for action, and getting impatient of empty speeches and hollow promises.

Crusader takes the Plunge

THE VIGOROUS PROPAGANDA campaign launched by Veeresalingam in 1879 in favour of widow remarriage began to have its effect on the youth of Andhra. Many students and others came forward not only to support his ideas but to practise them in their own personal lives. Parents and guardians of young virgin widows from different places approached him on the sly to see if he could do something for their children and wards.

The forward-looking sections of the community hailed his initiative and courage. They were ready to take the risk themselves, by offering to attend the marriages when celebrated. But the vast majority were still tradition-bound, and found his ideas too revolutionary for their taste and convenience. A few of the educated were waiting on the sidelines, watching his activities with a growing curiosity. Perhaps, they were too timid to join him or commit themselves to anything that would alter the *status quo*.

It was by then over two decades since the first widow remarriage in India was celebrated in Bengal. It happened in 1856 shortly after the passing of the Widow Remarriage Act that year. This was due largely, to the efforts of Pandit Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar. The first marriage in the Presidency of Bombay took place in 1869, thanks to the work done by Maharashtrian liberals like Mahadev Govind Ranade and Vishnu Sastri Chiplunkar.

In the city of Madras, Dewan Bahadur R. Raghunatha Rao and P. Chentsal Rao gave their moral support to the movement by publishing books and pamphlets on the subject. But no marriage had yet taken place in the Presidency of Madras till 1880. The credit of being the forerunner in this field goes to Rajahmundry, where the event took place on 11 December, 1881.

It needed all the courage and resourcefulness of Veeresalingam to see it through on that red-letter day. The bridegroom was one Gogulapati Sriramulu. The bride had to be fetched under cover of darkness from a distance of 150 miles by Veeresalingam's trusted men. The scared relatives of the bridegroom were out to use all their wits in dissuading him till the last moment.

There was a near total boycott by all the functionaries of marriage ceremonies; like the *Vaidiki* priests and Brahmin cooks, the drummers, trumpet-blowers and bugle-players, and others, representing a variety of traditional services. On top of a determined non-cooperation from the orthodox people, there was every reason to fear an outbreak of violence and disorder at the time of the wedding procession along the city's main thoroughfares.

If everything went off according to the expectations, with no untoward incidents, it was due to some other factors, apart from Veeresalingam's burning faith in the justice of the cause, as also in the mercy of Providence. He had relied on two friends, who stood by him through thick and thin—Pydah Ramakrishnaiah, a merchant prince of Kakinada who placed the much-needed funds at his disposal, and Basavaraju Gavarraju, a close companion of his, who was ready to face any consequence for his sake.

A few members of the inner circle of the WRA were not able to attend the function. One of them had been locked up in his room by the members of his family, while another was forcibly kept away. Many of them, however, managed to be present.

The local government, despite the British tradition of non-interference in religious and social matters, were helpful to Veeresalingam in maintaining law and order. The District Superintendent of Police, a British Officer was present in person at the function, besides posting a posse of sixty constables to guard the house and the procession. This was, of course, in addition to the battalion of local students who were already there to take care of their 'Master'.

The next marriage followed four days later. It was between a virgin widow of 12 years and a local student of about 20. It passed off smoothly, despite the threats of various kinds including social boycott.

Letters of ex-communication went out from the Sankaracharya to all his 'erring' disciples. Some of them promptly expressed their regret and promised to behave better. Over thirty families were affected this way. No less a person than Pydah Ramakrishnaiah, who had virtually financed these marriages and provided for the upkeep of these couples, lost his nerve and went through the *Prayaschittam* ceremony.

A. L. Narasimham, another colleague of Veeresalingam, replied to the notice of ex-communication from the Sankaracharya with a suit for defamation. But he lost it in the end on technical grounds. The disciples of the Sankaracharya, encouraged by this turn of events, made bold to attack the student-followers of Veeresalingam. But they got badly beaten in the encounter.

Following these incidents, there was a lull on this front for some months. The general atmosphere was not very conducive to new marriages. In the late summer of 1882, Veeresalingam visited the city of Madras, with his wife and the newly married couples, on the invitation of Chentsal Rao.

Apart from meeting like-minded friends and presenting the young couples to them at social parties, he gave a few lectures. It was a passionate address that he delivered in the Anderson Hall of the Madras Christian College.

Back in Rajahmundry, he resumed his tight schedule of work. It included, besides teaching at the Government School by day and the poor boys' school at night, the editing of the *Vivekavardhini* and the writing of books. There was a fairly long gap, of over ten months before the third marriage could be celebrated on 22 October 1882. It proved even more difficult than the first two. It was perhaps worth all the trouble at least for the happiness it gave Pandit Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar. He wrote from Calcutta on hearing of the event :

“ I am very much obliged to you for the information respecting the celebration of the marriage of the third Brahmana widow in your part of the country. The friends of the marriage of Hindu widows here have been exceedingly delighted by the happy news. . . . May uniform success attend your benevolent exertions on behalf of the unhappy sufferers is the earnest prayer of ”

By the middle of 1884, Veeresalingam had the satisfaction of completing ten marriages, including those of two Vaisya couples, as well as those from Brahmins of different sects. Along with the financial assistance of Pydah Ramakrishnaiah (for whom each marriage cost at least a thousand rupees) and the all-out help of his friend, Gavarraju, he had the unstinted cooperation of his wife, Rajyalakshamma, who worked as his right-hand in all these matters. In one of the marriages, she had even to fetch drinking water from the Godavari, at a distance of a mile from their residence. She had also to cook for the wedding guests herself.

At the end of the first series of experiments, he looked back on the record with a sense of fulfilment, tempered by a spirit of humility. The mood was one of thanksgiving :

“ I did not undertake this task with the confidence that I could see it through to the end, as I did not have high education, wealth, social status or great bodily vigour. I took it up mainly with the faith that it was for me a duty ordained by God and hence the highest. It is for man to work as best as he can; leaving the outcome to God; he should have no thought of the result. It will not be his fault

if, after doing his best in God's work, he sees no result forthcoming. He deserves praise for a duty well done."

The zeal of the new evangelist is coupled here with the *nishkama karma* attitude enjoined by the *Bhagavadgita*.

Never willing to compromise on the fundamentals of his conviction, Veeresalingam was, however, not against the method of going slow, where it was necessary in the interest of a healthy reform. For instance, he had no belief in the virtue of the caste system, as it was practised in contemporary Hindu society. But he respected the sentiments of those who adhered to it in arranging the marriage of widows. Almost all the marriages conducted by him during this period were those within the same caste and also within the same sect, in the beginning. Inter-sect marriages were something of an innovation in those days and inter-caste marriages were unheard of.

The widow marriage idea was first applied by him to the higher castes, the Brahmins and the Vysyas in particular. One reason for it might be that it was most needed among them. Enforced widowhood was practically unknown among many of the lower castes, which had their own safety valves and ways of social adjustment. It was, therefore, understandable that Veeresalingam did not choose to rub the contemporary society on the wrong side in matters not directly related to the substance of his reform.

At the first widow marriage, he chose not to protest too much against the nautch (dance) party arranged by some of his colleagues for the procession. But, of course, he did not allow it to step inside his house, as a conscientious objector.

With all the spirit of practical adjustment, Veeresalingam did not find the solution of problems any easier with the passage of years. In fact, they seemed to become progressively more difficult. Sometime in 1884, about three years after the first widow marriage, his friends and supporters decided to set up a new association, called the Widow Marriage Association. Its General Committee consisted of some new members as well as the founding fathers of this movement. All those married under the auspices of the Association were to be its other members. Veeresalingam was request-

ed by this body to make a tour of the neighbouring districts, along with his family, a servant and a priest, to promote the cause, at its expense.

Strangely enough, during the life of this Association, which lasted till the beginning of 1891, the number of new widow marriages performed was far from encouraging. While its membership rose steadily from the original six to over fifty, the actual number of marriages conducted was only three in a period of about seven years, as against ten in the three years before its formation. The Association was, however, not to blame, not solely at any rate, for this dismal record. The leader and his trusted colleagues had to reckon with a variety of adverse factors.

Some of the newly-wed couples, not the best specimens of humanity by any means, did not inspire the confidence of those who looked upon them as forerunners in this great adventure. Neither by their education and culture, nor by their conduct and character were they qualified for the exemplary role expected of them. A few of them were down and out and were more attracted by the prospect of a roof over the head and a regular allowance for keeping the body and soul together (guaranteed by the generosity of the benefactor) than any other lofty consideration. One or two of them had made an infernal nuisance of themselves for Veeresalingam and others. They began to bite the hand that fed them. They could not, strangely enough, forgive him for the good turn he had done them ! They were no longer interested in the problem of widow marriages, having found a vested interest in the resources available to them and likely to be augmented by the general public.

There were two other classes of men, who had an eternal grudge against Veeresalingam. The first was represented by those estimable gentlemen, who had come in for merciless exposure in the pages of the *Vivekavardhini* for patronage of 'dancing girls', for corrupt practices in government service, for irregularities in the courts of law, or other lapses in public life. The second comprised the social diehards, led by the Heads of Maths and other citadels of Hindu orthodoxy, for whom the name of Veeresalingam was

always anathema.

Even more important than all these was a single factor, that seemed to tilt the scales against Veeresalingam and his band of co-workers for some years to come. It was the death in 1886 of Pydah Ramakrishnaiah of Kakinada, who had been the mainstay of the movement in its ways and means position. Of the thirty thousand rupees, promised by him, he had given ten thousand, before he had any second thoughts. Even after 'recanting' for spiritual reasons, he continued to have a soft corner for the movement and indirectly placed another ten thousand at its disposal through the Association in Madras. As for the last ten thousand, he made a will on his death-bed, making a trust of it to be administered by A. L. Narasimham (a member of the Widow Marriage Association) as a trustee. The operative words in the will on the use of the recurring interest on the amount ("in the support of remarried widows and their husbands and children and bringing about widow marriages") were interpreted by the trustee to the utter disadvantage of Veeresalingam and the workers in the movement.

It was a bad let-down by an old friend of his, who turned hostile for personal reasons, one of them being the publication of a withering satire against him in *Vivekavardhini*. Veeresalingam was badly hit by this nasty turn of events.

Less than two years after that, his close friend Gavarraju, who was his right hand man in this movement, died suddenly. This was another blow dealt by an unkind fate.

For a time, he was disconsolate. His proud head was bloody, but unbowed. He was determined to go it alone, if necessary. Neither want of funds nor loss of friends was able to deter him from his onward march to the goal ahead.

VII

Religion with a Difference

FROM THE MOMENT Veeresalingam took up the problem of widow marriage, he never looked back. With unrelenting zeal, he pursued this goal. This made heavy demands on his time and energy. But social reform was not the be-all and end-all of his existence. His longings were too intense for that. He was basically a man of deep religious belief. But his conception of religion was strikingly different from what was dictated by family tradition and social convention. For him purity of personal conduct was of the highest importance, irrespective of the religion to which a person belonged. Prayer was another. And prayer, for him, had nothing to do with the ritual of the puja room in the Hindu household or periodical visits to the temple. When he grew to manhood he did not subscribe to the practice of idol worship. The influence of Christianity cannot be ruled out as an important factor in shaping his views on the mode of worship.

The message of Brahmo Samaj from Bengal was just beginning to be heard in the Andhra region through the speeches of Keshub Chandra Sen and the teachings of Ram Mohun Roy. About half-a-dozen young men, who thought alike on matters affecting the individual and the society, formed themselves into a 'Prarthana Samaj' at the residence of Veeresalingam in 1878. The immediate initiative came from one B. Rajalingam. Besides Veeresalingam, the group included B. Gavarraju, A. L. Narasimham, B. V. Jogaiah and K. Parthasarathi.

The Prarthana Samaj used to meet once a week in the mornings behind closed doors, to avoid the peering eyes of the busybodies of the town and escape the banter of the light-hearted elders. One of the members of the group used to sing devotional songs as part of the prayer. This was followed by a 'sermon' by Veeresalingam, to be published later in the pages of his journal, *Vivekavardhini*. It soon began to attract the attention of a wider public, who felt its gentle impact. Some of those who came to scoff remained to pray. A gentleman, reputed to be having a liaison with widows and thriving on it too, had changed after attending one of these meetings. The mother of this gentleman initially mis informed about the Samaj, lived to bless its members, after seeing things for herself.

It was under the initiative of the Samaj that the first night school for poor boys was started in Rajahmundry. Acts of charity for the blind, deaf, dumb and other physically handicapped persons were encouraged by the Samaj. Even the tradition-bound began to recognise the value of this work. Thanks to the work of the Samaj, the educated young were encouraged to look at religion not solely in terms of individual salvation but of social good as well.

That the Prarthana Samaj progressed by leaps and bounds, expanding its activities in all directions was as much a tribute to the intrepid spirit of the youth as to the enterprise of its leaders. Y. L. Narasimham did not rest content until he started a new school (under the name of the Theistic School) for the propagation of the pure doctrine of Theism, along with general education. He and Veeresalingam, along with other friends, worked together for this school which soon acquired a building of its own. Despite the differences on the pace of propagating the new doctrine (Veeresalingam insisting on a speedy method and Narasimham favouring a gradual process), the school project proved a success. The Prarthana Samaj, which had no permanent home of its own, was also located in the school building.

Veeresalingam also started a girls' school at Innispet, an important part of the town. As one who had always been vitally interested in women's education and as an essential pre-requisite for the

nation's progress this must have given him greater satisfaction than anything else.

The visit in 1881 of the Brahmo Samaj leader, Pandit Shivanath Shastri from Bengal, was a notable event for the youth of Rajahmundry. His inspiring lectures served to give a new impetus to the activities of the local Prarthana Samaj. It had seen its best years in 1881-82. Shivanath Shastri, who was an ardent disciple of Pandit Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar, exhorted the students to extend their outlook to ever-widening horizons of service to their fellowmen, who were all children of the same Creator. Following his visit, more Prarthana Samajs were started and more educated young men offered their services free for teaching the poor in night schools.

This was an index of the ferment among the educated youth to act as a catalytic agent for a general awakening among the people. No small part of this was due to the effect of the plays written by Veeresalingam during the period, which had an immediate bearing on contemporary affairs. The *Vyavahara Dharma-bodhini*, satirising the corrupt and vainglorious officials, was put on boards by the students, leaving the spectators in no doubt as to the characters sought to be exposed.

Despite his frail constitution, wrecked by recurring bouts of asthma, Veeresalingam's restless spirit kept him driving on along the path of unceasing activity in a wide variety of fields. Whatever be the nature of the work, and whoever might be his colleagues, he never let himself deviate from the strait and narrow path of virtue. An uncompromising purity of personal conduct that should contribute to the greatest good of the greatest number, according to his lights, was the religion that guided in this as in other spheres. There was no respite for him in the fight against corruption and favouritism, whether it was in the Municipal Council, of which he was a member, or the District Board or the Taluk Board. He managed to do all this, in addition to his full-time job at the Government School. The teaching at the night school was a labour of love for him and the lectures at the Prarthana Samaj, an outpouring of his spiritual passion. The literary output was also

being kept up all the time, without a break.

As a member of the Municipal Council, Veeresalingam demonstrated his loyalty to the principles of ethical conduct at every step. He did this, at the risk of losing his popularity and making sworn enemies of many who might have been his personal friends. In helping the Municipal Council (headed by an Official Chairman) to streamline its administration, he was confronted with many problems. One of them related to the removal of encroachments on the municipal roads by some of the rate-payers. He made no concessions to the rich or the influential in letting the law run its regular course. In a few hard cases, from which the other members were apt to shy away, he had to be present on the spot to see that the Municipal employees did the dismantling of unauthorised structures without let or hindrance. He contributed substantially to the income of the municipality by a rational application of the levy of the house tax and property tax, to the chagrin of those who were getting away rather lightly, with official connivance. But none could accuse him of being unfair or vindictive, not even those who were his bitterest opponents on the widow marriage issue. He could be hard, where necessary, but never could he be satisfied with less than justice to himself or to others.

Reputed to be a moderate in politics, who could even be dubbed a 'loyalist' by his opponents, Veeresalingam was no tame 'yes man' to the British bosses. He displayed a rare degree of personal independence in his dealings with the white officials, whose word was law in those days. He was probably the only member of the Municipal Council to lodge a protest against the proposal to elect an Executive Officer with punitive powers, like the Sub-Collector, as Chairman of the Council. In fact, the person who was elected, despite his protest, came to develop such high regard for Veeresalingam's rectitude and integrity as to nominate him to deputise for him in his absence. The white official (by name Hamnett) had this to write to him on his transfer to another District :

"I must tender you my sincere thanks for the assistance you have given me and the untiring energy you have displayed in connection with the Municipality during the last

few months. I am convinced that you are the best man to fill the post of Chairman. But you see a system of free election by ballot does not always result in the best man being returned.'

He never let the European official-Chairman to have it all his way, taking the Indian members' assent for granted. The exchange of words he sometimes had with the presiding officers on points of fact and law, as well as of procedure, only enhanced their respect for him. It was a triumph of character on his part, despite a bluntness of expression and shortness of temper. It was no less a tribute to the sense of fairness ingrained in the make-up of the English gentleman, that made him respect the opponent.

Public work and Recognition

V EERESALINGAM CHOSE TO resign his membership of the Municipal Council, though he was making a name for himself in this field. In fact, he retired from all public bodies, following the death of his friend, Gavarraju, which left him in a state of utter depression.

His health, never too good, was also deteriorating under the strain of the vexatious litigation and prolonged controversies with friends who turned hostile to him, oftentimes for no fault of his. While the Widow Marriage Association was not very active for some years after the death of two of his trusted friends, Gavarraju and Pydah Ramakrishnaiah, he could not help suspending the publication of the journal, *Vivekavardhini* in 1890. It became impossible for him to find the time and energy or the resources to keep it alive, when there were so many other demands, pressing on him.

There were for instance, quite a few equally important items of public work that began to engage his attention. The idea of raising an assembly hall, which could conveniently be used for the meetings in connection with the widow marriage movement, had been on his mind, ever since the year 1879, when he delivered his first lecture on the subject and had no end of difficulty in finding a proper venue for it. He tried to give shape to this idea by mooted the project for the construction of a town hall (in the name of one

Col Macdonald, the Superintendent of Schools in the Presidency), but it had to be given up for want of adequate response from the public.

The idea was revived during the golden jubilee year of Queen Victoria's reign in 1887. The public response, this time especially from the zamindars, was more encouraging. It took nearly three years for Veeresalingam to collect donations, in kind as well as in cash, for the completion of the project in 1890. He got the site at a concessional price and part of the timber free of cost. It was no easy task for a schoolmaster, whose salary did not exceed fifty rupees a month to collect a sum of over seven thousand rupees, largely on his own responsibility. But he did it.

The town hall, reputedly the first of its kind in the Andhra districts, came into existence in October 1890. He added a reading room to it and a billiards table for recreation. The hall was declared open by Prof. M. Rangacharya, Head of the Department of Sanskrit in Presidency College, Madras, a distinguished scholar of those days. In his speech, he paid a high tribute to Veeresalingam for his public work.

Pandit Sivanatha Sastri, of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, Calcutta, who visited the city the following month, hailed the construction of the new hall as a far-sighted measure, meeting a long-felt public need. Veeresalingam would not allow the hall to be named after himself. Nor would he agree to be a member of the Board of trustees, despite the insistence of the public.

However, it would not be correct to assume that he was able to enjoy the unstinted cooperation of all the leading citizens of Rajahmundry in his efforts to promote public good. Some of his erstwhile friends, were busy pushing more hurdles into his way while he was struggling hard to remove those that were already there. One of them was Y. L. Narasimham an original member of the old social reform group, later headmaster of the Theistic High School. He

was now the Chairman of the local Municipal Council.

Veeresalingam had the unpleasant duty of exposing him in the pages of his journal, and elsewhere and incurring his wrath as a consequence. They came to a head-on collision over some incidents of repeated stone-throwing on the house of a helpless widow. She sought the help of Veeresalingam, having failed to get police protection, as a last resort. On making careful on-the-spot enquiries, Veeresalingam had valid reasons to believe that the incidents were engineered by his old friend, out of a very questionable personal motive. There had for sometime been a growing rift between them and these new incidents only widened it.

Besides inciting one of the parties, who had sold the site of the town hall, to sue Veeresalingam on a trumped-up charge. Narasimham himself chose to file a suit for defamation against him. It was alleged by him that Veeresalingam had sullied his good reputation by accusing him of having incited others to throw stones on a widow's house. A criminal charge was also brought against Veeresalingam for the reference in *Vivekavardhini* to "stone-throwers passing for gentlemen". Though neither of the charges could be sustained till the end, Veeresalingam had to undergo a lot of needless harassment, before he could emerge unscathed from this affair. He had to take a year's leave from school, because of this litigation, which meant a number of sleepless nights to his friend and counsel, N. Subba Rao Pantulu. To friends and foes alike, it became clear at the end of the ordeal, that Veeresalingam was not the man to agree to the slightest deviation from honesty as an easy way out of ticklish situations. Also that Personal friendships would not be allowed to come in the way of the pursuit of justice.

After *Vivekavardhini* had ceased publication, Veeresalingam was persuaded by his friend Nyayapati Subba Rao Pantulu, to look after the journal, *Chintamani*. This was recently started by him (1891), and was being printed at

the Vivekavardhini Press. Besides printing the friend's journal, Veeresalingam was helping it substantially by contributing to its pages.

On behalf of the local Prarthana Samaj, he started a new journal called *Satyasamvardhini*. His interest in the Samaj had always been earnest and whole-hearted. This covered his spiritual aspirations, while the widow marriage movement represented his social commitment. At his own expense, he purchased a small piece of land adjacent to the town hall, and raised a modest structure to house the Prarthana Samaj and its library, as an adjunct to the town hall. This was declared open in 1897 by his friend and admirer, Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu of the Noble College, Masulipatnam, a rising leader of the Brahmo Samaj movement in Andhra.

In the New Year honours for 1893, Veeresalingam was awarded the title of "Rao Bahadur". Never was this honour found to have been better deserved. What used to be the coveted reward for "loyalty" to the Crown, among the "native" leaders of some political importance, had in this case become an official tribute to the courage of conviction and social awareness of a private individual. Seldom was a mere schoolmaster, a poor Telugu Pandit at that, chosen for this high honour by the State.

Friends and admirers of Veeresalingam, as also strangers from far and near, hailed the official gesture with great enthusiasm. His own chief, E. P. Metcalfe, the Principal of the Rajahmundry College, was able to speak with authority derived from personal knowledge. He said in his letter to Veeresalingam :

"Let me lose no time in congratulating you on your new honour. I have known of it for a long time but could not speak of it, as it was referred to me confidentially. As I said then, and now say again, there is no one within my knowledge has better deserved it."

The sentiment was echoed in a chorus of tributes.

S. Rangaiah Chetty, Telugu Translator to the Government of Madras (an important public figure of those days) was overjoyed :

“..... In the long list of the recipients of honours, I cannot think of a more deserving recipient....”

Andhra Prakasika (a weekly Telugu journal published from Madras), in a detailed write-up, recounted his untiring services to Telugu literature and the cause of social reform. It paid homage to his moral earnestness and single-minded devotion to the chosen cause. It made no secret of the discomfiture caused by the news in the minds of those not favourably disposed to him.

It is worth noting that even those who did not see eye to eye with him in his social philosophy, could not withhold their admiration for his spirit of dedication :

“Our regret that we do not accept your theories in regard to social reform concerning betrothal and marriage does not in the least militate against our admiring your singlemindedness of purpose and perseverance in the path of practical reform.....”

Veeresalingam did not rise one fine morning to find himself famous. He was already a well-known figure. But he was now in greater demand in places outside Rajahmundry as well as nearer home.

The Godavari District Conference was organised in Eluru in the middle of 1897. A District Social Conference, the first of its kind, was also held in this connection. Veeresalingam was invited to preside over it in the absence of his friend, N. Subba Rao Pantulu.

An unprecedented feature at this Conference was the presence of women, the wives of the members, among the audience. This was possible because of the insistence of Veeresalingam. He maintained that women should be encouraged to be present at a Conference dealing with problems of paramount interest to their own sex. The conservatives were shocked at the suggestion.

However, a beginning was made.

Veeresalingam's eagerness to extend his range of activity to fresh fields and pastures new, would be quite understandable at this stage of his career. Almost everyone who wanted to do something worthwhile and see it gain currency among a wider public, thought of the city of Madras, the headquarters of the Presidency and the nerve-centre of cultural life, south of the Vindhyas. Veeresalingam, no stranger to Madras, thought of it too.

IX

In the Metropolis

THE ONE CONSIDERATION that seems to have weighed most with Veeresalingam in his decision to shift his residence to Madras was the publication of his collected works in several volumes, besides the anxiety to extend his activities. He hoped to settle down for good and spend the rest of his years here. Therefore, he took leave without pay from the Government, for two years to start with, expecting, thereafter, to retire from the service altogether. Some three years earlier, he had purchased a small house for himself in Purasawalkam, near that of his friend, Mannava Butchaiah Pantulu, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj movement in the city of Madras.

Parting is always sweet sorrow. It was not without a wrench that even Veeresalingam, not given to the expression of maudlin sentiment, had to tear himself away from Rajahmundry—the place of his birth and activity. In the round of social parties and farewell dinners that were thrown for him in Kakinada, as well as in Rajahmundry, all the old local feuds were forgotten, at least for the time being.

Veeresalingam notes in his autobiography that a total of 27 widow marriages had been conducted by him before his departure for Madras.

“I ardently hope Madras will appreciate your disinterestedly voluntary services”, wrote his old friend, S. Rangaiah Chetti, welcoming him to Madras. Tempering his personal rejoicing with reasonable doubts arising from a realistic assessment of the

social milieu in Madras, the well-meaning friend, however added : "Of course, the social reform party will muster strong around you; but alas ! will the influential and educated gentlemen of position and fame extend their right hand to so worthy a person as thy goodself ? May God help them to do the needful for the cause and for themselves!"

The fears of this friend, an old resident of Madras who knew his city well, were not quite unfounded. This fact was to be realised by Veeresalingam himself, in course of time, after getting to know the leading citizens and their ways.

Soon after he settled down to work, he turned his attention to the publication of his books. He began to print all of them in the new press, known as the Chintamani Press, located in his own house. Even with the help of the new steam-driven equipment, he had earlier imported for this press from England, it took nearly two years for his project to be completed in ten sizable volumes.

The strenuous labour he had to put in on this job, including the proof-reading, told heavily on his health. As a result, he was obliged to suspend the publication of the periodical, *Chintamani*, entrusted to him by his friend. He, however, had the satisfaction of seeing his ten volumes neatly brought out, on almost the same lines as they were later to be available (in the official edition under the imprint of the Hitakarini Samaj).

Regarding promotion of the cause of social reform by projecting the problem on a wider canvas, the answer now available for us is not so simple or straight, as one would have it. Being essentially a man of action, Veeresalingam was impatient of all claptrap and was allergic to prevarication. He generally proceeded on the sound assumption that an ounce of practice was worth more than a ton of theory and empty discussion.

The first reform dinner that he happened to attend in Madras served as an early eye-opener to him. The 'reform' involved here was nothing more than the public interdining of Brahmins with non-Brahmins. Not without its limited uses as a beginning.

this did not appear to Veeresalingam as being particularly effective. He saw no point in it when he came to know that the 'brave' participants in the dinner were fighting shy of having their names published in the papers. When he came to know of this, he did not hesitate to tell them in their face what he thought of them.

We do not know whether it had any effect on them, by way of infusing some courage of conviction and integrity. But we know it for certain that this was the last of the reform parties of its kind, to which he was invited and which he persuaded himself to attend. He said almost the same thing at one or two of the public meetings that mere highsounding pronouncements would not do if practice could not keep pace with them. He was amused at the verbal eloquence on post-puberty marriages by a local reformer, who ended up by marrying off his own daughter before she completed eight years of age. This was not an isolated instance.

Soon after his arrival in Madras, Veeresalingam was elected President of the Social Reform Society, as well as the South Indian Brahmo Samaj. These placed new responsibilities on his shoulders. He purchased at his own expense a small building, suitable for housing both the societies. His residence, which had the press on the premises, also provided shelter to a few of the young widows studying in the Egmore Girls' School.

A little later, he purchased a site on the city's outskirts, in the midst of a causerina plantation. He cut it down to raise a modest structure to locate the widows' home—hostel as well as school. He spent a pretty penny on it. This included the bulk of his own modest savings, and the donations he was able to collect through his initiative.

But he was confronted with many difficulties in the process of maintaining the widows' home. The physical distance was a factor and the lack of adequate local response to contribute funds for its maintenance was another. In the enlightened but conservative city of Madras, there was no shortage of verbal

support for social reform on the platform. But its translation in terms of monetary aid was a different matter.

Whatever be the appreciation at the local level, Veeresalingam's daring work began to gain national recognition in due course. In the year 1898, he was invited to preside over the Indian Social Conference, whose session was held along with the Indian National Congress meeting in Madras. It was at this session that Mahadev Govinda Ranade, who inaugurated it, publicly hailed Veeresalingam as "the Vidyasagar of the South". This was only the public recognition of a position which had long been accepted by the people of the South, Andhra in particular.

Legion was the number of important regional conferences over which he presided thereafter. Notable among them were the Madras Provincial Social Conference held in Kakinada in 1902 and the Krishna District Social Conference in Vijayawada the following year. He was also elected President of the Indian National Theistic Conference in Madras in 1903.

As the Madras Regional Secretary of the Indian Social Conference, he was a tower of strength to the leaders of reform at the national level. He successfully thwarted all the desperate attempts of the conservative section in Madras, which was opposed to reform, under the plausible pretext of adopting indigenous methods, to prevent the issue of widow marriage from being put on the agenda of the open session. He proved a little too resourceful for the machinations of the Madras 'reformers' who formed themselves into a new group under the description of this Hindu Samaj, which, however, was shortlived.

While the results of his work in the sphere of social reform and womens' education were discouraging, it was different in other spheres. Personally the stay in Madras was not without its advantages for Veeresalingam. He came to be associated with many of the academic bodies and official committees as a recognised authority on Telugu language and literature. These included the executive of the vernacular section of Madras School-book Committee, the Government's Textbook Commi-

tee and the college committee on Dravidian languages. He was also appointed by the Government as a member of the panel of examiners in Telugu in the Languages tests for Sub-Collectors and other executive officers. He took active interest, along with local friends, in the organisation of an association for the promotion of the Dravidian languages.

Within the two years of his leave without pay, Veeresalingam was able to complete the printing of all his works in ten volumes. He was planning to retire prematurely from government service and devote the rest of his years for social work in Madras. A couple of months before the expiry of his leave, he happened to see the then Director of Public Instruction, Duncan. He was deeply interested in Veeresalingam and wanted to retain him in Madras.

The Principal of the Presidency College, Stuart, sprang a pleasant surprise on him by offering him the post of Telugu Pandit in the College and insisting on his joining duty immediately. This involved the transfer to the Rajahmundry College of the then incumbent to the post, Kakkonda Venkataratnam Pantulu—his old adversary in social and literary matters. Needless to add that the latter was far from happy at the prospect of his dislocation from Madras and thanked Veeresalingam with all the sarcasm at his command, for enabling him once again “to have a dip in the sacred Godavari.”

The new job, which was something of a prize post for any Telugu scholar of the day, however, meant a heavy strain on Veeresalingam, who had to teach ‘Translation’ methods as well as the prescribed books. Physical distance from his house to the college also created problems of transport and additional expenditure for him. On the other side, he was receiving less and less encouragement in his first love and major task, namely social reform.

In less than four years, he decided to retire from service on a proportionate pension of less than Rs. 25 before he was quite ripe for superannuation. Madras lost much of its attraction

for him and the call of his home-town became stronger than ever. The widening circle of his students and friends in Madras were sorry to lose him. But he had made up his mind, and packed his bags for return to Rajahmundry in 1905.

Years of Consolidation

ON HIS ARRIVAL in his home-town sometime in 1905, Veeresalingam was far from enthused over the state of local affairs. He found little or no follow-up action in any of the programmes of social work he had helped to activate earlier. His absence of eight years and more from the scene seemed to have had its adverse effect on many of the institutions with which he had identified himself. He noted with regret that those in charge of the reading room attached to the Victoria Jubilee Town Hall, which he had been responsible for starting, had not taken any interest in it, during his absence. They had not even bothered to continue the subscription for the INDIAN SOCIAL REFORMER (an English Weekly published from Bombay, under the editorship of the distinguished social thinker and journalist, K. Natarajan). This must have cost only a nominal amount. A good commentary on the degree of interest shown by his associates !

The generation of intrepid youth, who were ready to jump into the fray, at the slightest nod of approval from their beloved master, Veeresalingam, had long outgrown their student period. The new batch of students, naturally, did not know him well enough. The lapse of time must have snapped many of his local links. It was a story of "new faces and other minds", that threatened to confront him. For a time, it seemed he had become a stranger at home. But Veeresalingam was the last man to leave things to chance or let his chosen work go by default. As long as life lasted, he would have no rest until matters were set right. Nor

would he let other people forget what was expected of them.

Luckily for Veeresalingam, there were still a few good friends who were ready to do anything for him. The most important of them was a dedicated young man, recently graduated from the Madras Christian College, by name Desiraju Pedabapaiah. A trained teacher, he was bent upon rendering service to his fellowmen instead of taking to a professional career for himself.

There were two objects in view for Veeresalingam to work for on his return to Rajahmundry. The first was to start a school for girls, whose education had always been uppermost in his mind. He decided to name it after Queen Victoria. This school was meant to serve the needs of the inmates in the widow's home, as also the others outside, and prepare them for admission to higher classes in the high school. To get over the problem of building construction and the like, he located the school in his own ancestral house in the town, leaving a small portion of it for himself and his wife as residential quarters.

The response from the public was quite encouraging, far beyond his own expectations, in fact. Starting with a handful of girls, the school could claim nearly fifty pupils before the end of the first year, the number rising to a hundred and fifty in the second year. He had three male and three female teachers on the staff, with Pedabapaiah as the Secretary, who acted as his right-hand man. He was doing some teaching at the school whenever he could spare some time for it.

Despite his limited means, he paid the salaries of the teachers, which came to nearly Rs. 1700 in the first year, out of his own pocket. He also requisitioned the services of a lady teacher who had grown under his care. She and her husband, also a teacher, were both working at that time in South Kanara. He had brought them to Rajahmundry at considerable expense to himself. They both assisted him for some years in the management of this school, though they had ultimately to part company with him.

The second object was the starting of a weekly, to serve as an effective vehicle of publicity for his views in support of the

work that needed to be done. The *Vivekavardhini*, along with the *Hasya Sanjeevani*, as also the *Chintamani* (sponsored by his friend, Nyayapati Subba Rao Pantulu and entrusted to him for publication from Madras) had all ceased publication, for quite some years. He was feeling terribly handicapped, with no organ of his own to influence public opinion.

He had earlier taken care not to dispose of the Chintamani Printing Press set up by him in Madras, when he decided to leave the city for good. He brought it to Rajahmundry, not minding the heavy freight he had to pay for its transit by sea. Well-versed in the printing trade himself and having trained some compositors and other press workers in the past, he had little difficulty in starting a journal. He could easily pick up the broken threads. He had to bear the strain of finding the wherewithal for the salaries of the workers.

The new journal, *Satyavadini*, was able to make its appearance on March 1, 1906. It contained sections in English, as well as in Telugu. The *Satyavadini*, like its predecessor, *Vivekavardhini*, was fearless and outspoken. Wealth or influence, social status or official position, were not enough to protect one from its criticism. None was spared. Certainly not those who fell from the ethical standards set for themselves or expected of them by those who looked up to them for leadership.

For instance, the issue dated March 29, 1906 severely castigated the behaviour of the Zamindar of Polavaram, who had chosen to contract a second marriage, and that too with a young girl of ten, while his first wife was alive. The fact that he happened to be an educated man, who should have set an example to others, made the lapse all the more glaring. The paper said, among other things :

“ Education, without morals, is no real education; A man, however, educated he might be, does not deserve to be called a human being, if he were to be devoid of morals; he deserved to be shunned by good men. To err is, of

course, human, but it behoves a wise man to repent his error and mend his ways. We, therefore, appeal to the Zamindar to bring his first wife back home and treat her well. We also hope that the second wife, when she grows up and attains maturity, will receive a treatment befitting her status as a partner in life and not share the fate of her unhappy co-wife. . . .”

These words seem to have deeply hurt the Zamindar, as also the Editor of the *Arya Mata Bodhini* (a journal supported by him), who reacted rather violently with a personal attack. Veeresalingam was charged with ‘base ingratitude’ for having had the temerity to criticise the Zamindar, after receiving all the monetary and other help from him for the widows’ home. But this did not deter Veeresalingam from the stand he took in the best interests of the individual and the society. If criticise he must, he did so, more in sorrow than in anger. He recalled the fact that the Zamindar happened to be his former pupil and personal friend, and also a relative. He maintained that while he remained grateful to him for all the help rendered, he reserved to himself the right to have his own judgment on men and matters. He was entitled to point out what struck him as unbecoming in the conduct of a friend and help him to reform himself, if reform were possible. Veeresalingam was one of the Zamindar’s true wellwishers. He preferred the way of truth, harsh and unpleasant though it be, to the sycophantic way of pleasant hypocrisy.

During the years 1905-6, there were two important events in the life of Veeresalingam. One was his decision to become an ‘*Anushtanic Brahmo*’ (an active adherent to the practices of Brahmo Samaj) and, the other the formation of the Hitakarini Samaj. After the Samaj was formed, he shifted all his activities to an extensive garden on the city’s outskirts to be fully developed in due course.

It was true that he had long been inspired by the social ideals of Raja Ram Mohun Roy and was working broadly on the lines of the Brahmo Samaj with its headquarters in Calcutta.

The Prarthana Samaj that he founded in Rajahmundry was a tangible proof of this. While he was completely in agreement with all the teachings of Brahmo Samaj, he had done nothing to cut himself away from the mainstream of Hindu society as yet. As a practical reformer, keenly alive to the realities of the contemporary situation, he thought it better to initiate all the reform measures as an 'insider' rather than as an 'outsider.' The cause of social reform, including widow marriage, never too easy, would have been rendered all the more difficult, had he placed himself beyond the pale of the caste system, even at the early stages. This was not because he believed in the caste system, with its inequities, but because he preferred to wait for the time when he might be able to attend to it, to his satisfaction.

Some of his younger friends like Desiraju Pedabapaiah were comparatively unencumbered to take the initiative in this respect. Sometime in the year 1905, Pedabapaiah expressed to Veeresalingam his desire to embrace the creed of an Anushtanic Brahmo, which meant, in practical terms, that he wanted to discard the sacred thread and give up caste along with it, and cease to observe the traditional practices and ceremonies enjoined on every orthodox member of the Hindu community. Veeresalingam heartily approved of his idea, and he gave him all the encouragement in observing the death anniversary of his father according to Brahmo rites.

He wrote to his friend, Pandit Sivanatha Sastri of Calcutta on this, seeking relevant instructions. He also indicated his own intention to follow suit. He accordingly officiated for the priest in conducting the *Shraaddha* ceremony and partook of the dinner, along with the other invitees. This was followed by a reform dinner, i.e. an inter-caste dinner, at the residence of Bapaiah, attended by one or two Christians, besides Hindus of the three castes—Brahmana, Vaisya and Sudra.

This event was unprecedented in the history of Rajahmundry. News about this was prominently published in *The Indian Messenger* of Calcutta with the names of those who attended the

dinner. When the same names figured in a report in the local *Satyavadini*, there was a veritable flutter in the social devocotes. With the exception of a few, most of the 'pressive' diners made haste to recant their 'indiscretion'. They also wore the metaphorical equivalent of sack cloth and ashes by undergoing the ceremony of *Praayaschittam*.

A few days later, in the middle of February 1906, Veeresalingam observed the death anniversary of his father, according to Brahmo rites. At the ceremonial feast held in this connection he invited members of all the communities, including Christians. He publicly signified his intention to become an *Anushtanic Brahmo* from that day and refused to observe any difference relating to caste or community in his own life.

The twin doctrines central to the teaching and practice of all the Brahmo Samaj and Prarthana Samaj branches, that require to be emphasised here are : belief in the fatherhood of God, the master of all creation; and belief in the brotherhood of man, with no distinction of race, colour, caste or creed. This applied to all members of the Brahmo Samaj, passive as well as active. But, it was obligatory on the part of one who professed to be an *Anushthanic Brahmo* to practise them in his personal life, setting an example to the others. Veeresalingam reiterated his faith in these doctrines publicly and left nobody in doubt about his religious convictions. But he did not discard the sacred thread as yet. And thereby hangs a tale !

It will help to remember that at this time, the widow's home, run by Veeresalingam, was situated in his own house, for want of a separate building. He had given notice of his decision to become an *Anushthanic Brahmo* to the inmates of the home, numbering three. Of these three, two were Brahmins and one was a Sudra. The last one decided to stay on with him, while the other two had made it clear to him that they would not mind his conversion and would continue to dine in his house, as long as he retained his sacred thread.

To accommodate them, as also a Brahmin boy, who was then

dependent on him, he decided to put off discarding the sacred thread till the end of the month, giving them time to make other arrangements. He duly carried out his intention, as already announced to the public. But in doing so, he could not avoid being misunderstood by some of his friends, not to speak of his foes.

This delay by a month naturally gave rise to many conflicting reactions. While some were obviously impatient about the delay there were others who feared that the cause of social reform, so dear to Veeresalingam, might be adversely affected by the action.

To leave no one in doubt about his intentions, Veeresalingam published, in his periodical, *Satyavadini*, a detailed letter, explaining his stand on matters—social, religious and spiritual. He said, among other things :

“Though the Prarthana Samaj has been active in Rajahmundry for nearly thirty years, some of its members have, only now, decided to become *anushthanic*, which means that they would hereafter practise the teachings of the Samaj to the letter. I happen to be one of them. . . . Is it not accepted on all hands that example is a lot better than empty precept? If one’s precept is not good enough for practice by one’s own self, how can it possibly carry conviction to others?”

“ . . . A man who proves as good as his word deserves the respect of the members of his own Samaj at least. It is regrettable that some of the gentlemen, apt to be braver with their words than with their deeds, should find fault with others who had been able to do what they themselves failed to do. It is not fair to dismiss it as ‘haste’ and ‘lack of foresight’.

“ From my sickbed, I appeal to my brethren of the Samaj to treat us with due consideration and not dismiss us as being the victims of ‘haste’ and ‘folly.’ Could there be any ‘haste’ in the pursuit and practice of Truth? What is it that is meant by waiting for the proper time? When you are able to recognise an act of good, for what it is, that is just the time for doing it. When you see the truth clearly, that is just the time to practise it. To plead the excuse of want of time for one’s own remissness

betrays the weakness of one's faith in God and Truth.

"I hope and pray that some of these good men whose flesh is weak, though the spirit may be willing in the pursuit of Truth, will have the largeness of heart to give the fearless Truth-seeker the credit for courage."

Answering the critics who had fears of their own about the repercussions of his decision on the future of the Reform Movement, Veeresalingam said :

"Some people are under the misapprehension that my decision to renounce the caste system and my affirmation of faith in the equality and brotherhood of man had proved harmful to the cause of social reform in general and of widow marriage in particular. No reform in the world depends, for its strength, so much on the life of a single individual as on the intrinsic justice of its cause. The will of God might sometimes make even a physical weakling like me an instrument for the promotion of the cause of reform, but the reform itself would not die with him. Help will come from unexpected quarters to keep it alive and multiply its strength a thousandfold.

"That apart, my decision to free myself from the prejudices of caste does not mean that I have decided to free myself from the responsibilities of social reform as well. In the realignment of my spiritual relations, the Hindu girls, who are all children of God, along with the others, are even nearer and dearer to me as sisters. The amelioration of their plight, devolves on me as a supreme and bounden duty to be pursued with even greater vigour than ever before.

"I am prepared hereafter to sacrifice all my resources — monetary, mental and physical, my life itself if necessary, in the cause of improving the lot of women in general and of widows in particular."

Reiterating his faith in a higher power, which was greater than all his critics put together, Veeresalingam remarked :

".....It appears that some of the unique social reformers, from the Theistic fold, would cry hoarse that I have disqualified myself for discharging the reformer's function, for the

simple reason that I have given up the practice of idol worship and caste distinction (and the prejudices that go with it) and have accepted the unity of Godhead. Maybe I had since forfeited my right to work under their generous patronage and enjoy the privilege of their friendship. Though hundreds of thousands of these 'selfless' gentlemen feel it beneath their dignity to accept my service, as long as the King of Kings remains my chief prop and propeller in my service to the nation, how could I become unfit for doing my own duty? The while that God Almighty continues to be my chief supporter, why should I suffer for want of support from a few of the weak mortals?

"...I appeal to those friends who are proud of calling themselves social reformers not to indulge in idle vanities, but bear with the men of action in the field. I have come to believe firmly in the maxim that without spiritual reform, it would be impossible to make a success of social reform, or any other reform for that matter.

"The problem of widow marriage remains almost in the same state as it was in the beginning, without registering any remarkable progress... so far, I had used some part of my resources, including my strength and wealth, education and intelligence, to promote this cause. I shall not give it up as long as there is life left in me."

Explaining his struggle to prove true to himself and to his Maker, Veeresalingam, as the Senior President of the Southern India Brahmo Samaj, observed :

"I have now, therefore, gathered courage to embrace this principle of the brotherhood of Man. Even if my sojourn in this world were to end this day, I could lay down my life with a sense of satisfaction that I had exchanged self-deception for truth and had thereby come closer to God. May Lord grant me complete peace of mind! May He grant the world the capacity to benefit from the example of people like me? May my friends excuse me and ex-

tend to me the same goodwill as they used to do before !”

A few months after this event, the local opponents of Veeresalingam started a fortnightly called, *Hindu Desabhivardhini*, mainly with the purpose of conducting a campaign of personal vilification against him. Published nominally under the editorship of a struggling schoolmaster, by name Shyama Rao, it had obviously the support of some wealthy and influential persons in the town, who were afraid to come out into the open. In the very first issue of this periodical, there was a story relating to the supposed happenings in the widows' home, casting serious aspersions against the supervision of Veeresalingam himself, and the character of the inmates.

It was alleged therein that the young widows seeking the protection of the veteran social reformer were in for disappointment, as he was now not so eager to work for the welfare of these unfortunate girls. He was more interested in seeking his own personal salvation as a practising Brahmo, who had given up the faith of the orthodox Hindu fold into which he was born. A story was told that an interloper, a male one at that, in female guise, was at large among the inmates of the widows' home. When enough harm had been done by this deception, Veeresalingam happened to surprise the culprit and was shocked to know the ugly truth. But the latter managed to decamp, before anything could be done to him.

Deeply offended by this insinuation, Veeresalingam threatened to sue the publisher of the journal for defamation, unless he came out with an unqualified apology. The latter was unbending, because of the backing he received from some of the interested parties. He was, therefore, prosecuted in a court of law (that of the Joint Magistrate), which found him guilty and sentenced him to pay a fine of a thousand rupees and to undergo imprisonment for eighteen months.

This came as a surprise even to Veeresalingam who did not wish for such a severe punishment. The sentence was, however, reduced on appeal and the accused had to go abegging from

door to door to make up the amount payable as fine. Veeresalingam had the satisfaction of winning his point, but he was genuinely sorry for the poor fellow.

It was only towards the end of the year 1906, that he was comparatively free from his preoccupation with the case for defamation and other diverting pressures. Veeresalingam was then able to concentrate his attention on the problem of giving a permanent and institutional form to all the social welfare activities to which he had devoted his energies. The Hitakarini Samaj, a public society formed in the middle of December 1906, was the result. The Samaj started functioning with a representative executive committee, constituted at a meeting of the citizens. However, it could be registered only in 1908. The three main institutions coming under its protection were the Theistic High School for Boys (renamed later as the Veeresalingam High School, under which name it continues till today), the Widows' Home and the Lower Secondary School for Girls. This was originally started by his friend, Chilakamarti Lakshminarasimham Pantulu, and taken over by Veeresalingam, with a view to its development as a high school, in course of time.

The fairly large site he had earlier purchased on the outskirts of the town, near the railway track, was being added to by more and more ground, whenever it was possible. It was his idea to raise the necessary buildings on it to house most of the institutions started by him. When he got the society registered in 1908, he had made a trust of his ancestral property as well as his life's savings, altogether exceeding a sum of forty thousand rupees. It was his idea to lay out a sizable garden, in which to live and look after all the activities. Many of his friends and former pupils came forth with offers in cash and kind to help him in his endeavour.

Despite local cooperation at all levels, Veeresalingam was faced with the problem of inadequate resources of the Samaj for improving its ways-and-means position. He undertook a fund-raising campaign which took him to many places in and

out of Andhra, like Kakinada, Berhampur, Bombay, Poona and Secunderabad. While the amounts collected were not adequate enough for the growing needs of the situation, his contacts with friends and admirers, far and near, reflected the extent of goodwill his selfless work had earned for him all over the country.

The merchant princes and other leading citizens of Kakinada had collected a tidy sum for him. In Berhampur, he received an enthusiastic welcome, especially from the Andhra residents of the town. Leaders of social reform like Justice G. N. Chandavarkar (of the Bombay High Court) and K. Nataraajan (Editor of the *Indian Social Reformer*), who held him in high regard, threw parties in his honour in Bombay. Kasinadhuni Nageswara Rao Pantulu, the up-and-coming businessman then trying his luck in that great city, was of no small help to Veeresalingam in collecting donations.

Poona was a necessary stop-over, where Veeresalingam spent some time with Prof. D. K. Karve, the social reformer and educationist, and saw his Ashram at work. At Secunderabad, he called at the residence of the Naidus (Sarojini and her husband, Major Govindarajulu, whose marriage was performed by him in Madras), where the ailing poetess introduced her children to their "grandfather".

He had also made his first trip to Calcutta, not so much to raise funds, as to repay a long-standing visit to his old friend, Pandit Shivanatha Sastri and also to meet some of the leading workers of the Brahmo Samaj movement in Bengal. The Pandit played host to him and Calcutta rejoiced to receive the "Vidyasagar of the South". This journey to Calcutta and back had something of a tonic effect on Veeresalingam. He not only stood the journey well but returned home quite refreshed in body and mind.

Veeresalingam completed sixty years of age on 14 April, 1908. The day was celebrated with genuine enthusiasm by friends from different walks of life including Komarrazu Lakshmana Rao and the Raja of Pithapuram.

Some time in the following year, he and his wife went to Bangalore, where they had decided to spend the summer. Attracted by its salubrious climate, as well as the hospitality of local friends, they repeated the visit in the succeeding years, making it their summer resort, whenever they could. He had also acquired a small house in the city. It was in this house that the seeds of social reform in Mysore were sown by him in the years 1908-1909. The first widow marriage in this city was performed by him in 1910. It had, of course, to be done in the Cantonment, in view of the laws then in force in the princely State of Mysore. It was an index of the manner in which the movement was spreading far from its place of origin, while it was getting stabilised nearer home.

Bereavement

NEVER TOO STURDY at the best of times, Veeresalingam began to get feebler still, when he was on the wrong side of sixty. The chronic asthma used to give him sleepless nights. The periodical escapes to Bangalore, from the hot and sticky summer months of Rajahmundry, provided the much-needed relief. But they were few and far between.

His anxiety was, however, more on account of his wife than on his own. And for a good reason too. Rajyalakshammamma, only three years younger than her husband, was gifted with a strong constitution and uniformly good health. Both of which stood her in good stead in undergoing the continued stresses and strains incidental to the role of a reformer's wife.

Veeresalingam was not sure how long he was going to survive, even when he was not seriously ill. He was pretty certain in his own mind that he would predecease his wife. His worry, therefore, was about what would happen to her in the event of his death. He sometimes feared that because of her deep attachment to him, she might go to the extent of taking her own life. If that danger were averted, he wondered who would be there to take care of her in his absence.

He had actually overheard her, in the twilight hour of his sleep one night, praying to God Almighty to take her away from this world during the lifetime of her husband. On waking up at dawn, he remonstrated her about this, warning her sternly

against any such foolish thoughts as suicide and the like. Prompt was her reply that while she would not do anything of the kind on her part, the Creator would see to it that her prayer was answered, and she would die a natural death. Reassured, for the time being, at any rate, he forgot all about it, in due course.

It was sometime in the middle of August 1910 that Veeresalingam recalled to his own mind the incident that had occurred a fortnight ago. It was a habit with the aged couple to retire early in the night and get up equally early in the morning. Before saying their prayers in the small hours of the morning, it was usual for them to spend a little time chatting with each other. It so happened that on the night of August 11, Veeresalingam got up a little earlier than his wife. An hour after that, he was not a little surprised to see her still in bed, instead of getting up and settling herself into the easy chair, as was her wont. He was under the impression that she might have overslept her schedule, due to the strain of the day's work. When he tried to wake her up gently, he was hardly prepared for the cold touch. He became confused and sent for the doctor nearby, hoping for the best. The doctor felt her pulse and pronounced her dead.

In fact, she had died in her sleep, a few hours earlier. Veeresalingam could not believe his ears and eyes. He fell to the ground in a daze, exclaiming :

“Oh God ! What a terrible blow you have dealt me in this old age!”

He seemed to hear in reply :

“It is just as well for both of you that it was so”, as he notes in his autobiography. He soon overcame grief on seeing some light and hope in these words. It was, however, not easy for him, or for any of the visitors, to get away from the impression that his wife was asleep. Everything about her was intact, the flowers in her hair and the *tilak* on her forehead. And a little later, when the body was seated in the easy chair, her favourite cat jumped into her lap, making itself cosy there, as

was its habit, when she was alive. This was a poignant moment for him who had watched the homely scene for years.

That the death of a wife should be the severest of blows to a husband could normally be expected. But in this case, there was a lot more than the ordinary husband-wife relationship. It was a rare partnership that covered every detail of life, lasting over half-a-century. Though she did not have the benefits of a formal education (as in fact, few girls of her time had) Rajyalakshamma threw herself wholeheartedly into all the social battles fought by her husband. She did not mind the scars, which were by no means infrequent. She refused to be deterred by any of the threats of social ostracism by her friends and relatives alike.

She not merely acquiesced passively in his campaigns, as any devoted Hindu wife might be expected to do, but gave him all the strength at her command by active involvement in them. There was nothing that she would not willingly do for the sacred cause. Water-carrier and cook, midwife and nurse, babysitter and foster-mother—all these roles she played, taking them all in her stride. Earning the gratitude of many helpless boys and girls, she was not afraid to court the hostility of some others, who made a virtue of biting the hand that fed them. We have it on the authority of Veeresalingam himself, not given to exaggeration for anything in the world, that but for her unfailing assistance, he would not have been able to achieve half of what he did in his life.

The sudden death of this devout and dedicated lady came as a shock not only to her husband and her beneficiaries, but to all the citizens of Rajahmundry and the people of Andhra and other parts of the country as well. Messages of sympathy for the old man in his grief poured in from all over the country. Crowds of visitors thronged the Ananda Gardens, where they lived and worked. Streams of 'Widow marriage' couples, who had enjoyed the benefit of her soothing touch poured in to have a last look at their 'mother' and share the 'father's grief.'

After the cremation in the gardens, Veeresalingam raised a *samadhi* at the place with a monument in marble inscribed in Telugu and English. He laid out a neat little flower garden around the structure, calling it *Rajyalakshmi Paramadaavanam*. That was the least that he could do for her memory, knowing, as he did, her inordinate love of flowers. In her temperament too, she had all the gentleness and fragrance of the rose to make up for his occasional sharpness of the thorn that went with it.

XII

The End

A CURSORY GLANCE at the stretch of years that Veeresalingam led as a widower would be enough to show how much he owed his wife and what he missed in her. Without her presence by his side, he not only felt psychologically lonely, but was severely handicapped in many practical ways. He could not command even the minimum of comforts, with which he had always been content, though he was not without the means to buy them.

The sizable number of "reformed families", who owed their existence and well-being to him, were either unable or reluctant to come to his aid. The families that lived on the premises of the Hitakarini Samaj, beneath his extended roof, as it were, did not prove very helpful in taking care of him, as he needed at his age.

His health began to deteriorate and he was not able to do much of writing or other work, which he was anxious to do at this period. He offered monetary inducements to anyone who might be ready to stay with him in the garden premises and keep his house for him. One of the three inmates at the widow's home, by the name Managamma, who was like his adopted daughter, was willing to stand by him through thick and thin. She was lucky enough to get a husband who would cooperate with her in this arrangement. Mangamma and her husband, Surya Prakasa Rao, or at least one of them, used to accompany him to Bangalore, Madras or wherever he might choose to go and stay from time to time.

Economically too, he began to face serious problems, despite his inherent frugality and habit of meticulous book-keeping. Among the main reasons for this state of affairs was the diminishing of generous benefactors, like some of his early friends, Pydah Ramakrishnaiah, for example. The latter could bear the burden of the Samaj and the waning public enthusiasm for a cause, which might have lost much of its novelty, though not its basic validity. A decline in his own intellectual energies resulted in a steep fall in the earnings from his literary output. The considerable income from University examinerships and other services, was no longer available to him, since he gave them up on the death of his wife.

As a cumulative effect of all this, he had to run into some debt for managing the widows' home and carrying on the other activities envisaged by the Samaj. Luckily for him, at this stage, the Maharaja of Pithapuram, one of his most loyal and steadfast supporters, through the good offices of his personal friend and co-worker, Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu, came forward with a lump sum donation of Rs. 3,000 and a monthly grant of Rs. 60 which went a long way towards setting matters right.

During the years, 1910 to 1913, the important literary work completed by Veeresalingam was his autobiography in two volumes. Earlier, he had no idea of doing anything of this kind. He was hoping that his younger contemporary, Basavaraju Gavarraju, would outlive him to write his biography. But Gavarraju died prematurely. Many of his other friends and admirers began to urge upon him the desirability of setting down the facts of his life at some length for the benefit of future generations. In deference to their wishes, he had started writing chapters of his autobiography as early as 1903. But he had to leave it unfinished, owing to other pressing demands on his time.

Those who had the opportunity of seeing the early chapters were unanimous in their admiration for them and in their appeal to him to press forward with the narrative. A further incentive for this was provided by the scholar and savant, Komarrazu

Lakshmana Rao Pantulu, who announced this as one of the titles in the 'Vijnana Chandrika Grantha Mandalī' series of publications, sponsored by him in Madras. Veeresalingam had, perforce, to take up the threads, hurry and complete the four unfinished chapters, constituting the first volume, to be published by Lakshmana Rao, in 1911.

The second volume began to take shape during his summer sojourn in Bangalore in 1910, during the life-time to his wife. It was completed in another summer at the same place, three years later, to be brought out by the author himself in 1915.

There was, however, no peace of mind for Veeresalingam during this period. As if to add to the misfortune of his bereavement in 1910, a variety of smaller troubles dogged him thereafter. He was drawn into an unseemly controversy caused by the whispering campaign against his life as a widower. A malicious report linking his name with that of the young lady, Mangamma, who was looking after him, was published in a local magazine called *The Carlylian* edited by a young lawyer, T. Sriramulu, a younger brother of Barrister T. Prakasam (*Andhra Kesari*). Veeresalingam proceeded against the editor and publisher for defamation in the Court of the Joint Magistrate, Rajahmundry, but the case was dismissed on technical grounds. (Sriramulu was represented by his brother Prakasam.) He had also the discomfiture of being put through his paces during the cross-examination by counsel opposite. Though the charge of defamation could not be sustained, there was widespread sympathy for the distinguished old man, who deserved better. Whatever might have happened and whatever was the outcome of the case, a lot of dirty linen was washed in public, to the ill-concealed glee of his opponents.

But nothing could keep a man like Veeresalingam from his chosen field of work—be it in social life or literature. He was not the sort to be too easily deterred by the infirmities of age or the adversities of fate. In 1917, when he was approaching the biblical span of three score and ten, with his health below par,

he took the trouble of bringing out the revised edition of the first part of his *Lives of the Telugu Poets*.

Two years later, he was invited to be the President of the Society for the propagation of current Telugu (Vartamana Andhra Bhasha Pravartaka Samajam), of which Gidugu Venkataramamurti Pantulu was the Secretary. The principal aim of the society was to bridge the yawning gap between written Telugu and spoken Telugu to the extent humanly possible and simplify the usage of written Telugu for the benefit of those who read and speak the language.

The seventyfirst birthday of Veeresalingam was celebrated quietly in his home town on 16 April 1919. He had not yet ceased from his literary activity. There was to be no end to it while he was alive. Three days later he set out on his journey to Madras, where he wanted to look up some references in the original sources available in the Oriental Manuscripts Library for working on the *Lives of the Telugu Poets*. He told his friends, who met him on the eve of his departure, about some of his hopes and fears. The three objects yet to be realised by him were :— (1) The establishment in Rajahmundry of a well-equipped library in the name of the classical Telugu poet, Nannaya Bhattu; (2) The completion of his work on the lives of the poets; and (3) the preparation of a comprehensive grammar of the Telugu language.

“I am not sure if I will be able to return to Rajahmundry from Madras this time”, he said, adding, “in any case, if I am not able to realise the objects within my lifetime, I hope and trust that my friends will try and see them come true”.

That was the message he left for the citizens of Rajahmundry and the people of Andhra in general, before he entrained for Madras.

About his stay in the city of Madras, we have, at least two eye-witness accounts of unquestioned reliability. The first of them, Dr. Achanta Lakshmipati (the famous Ayurvedic physician originally trained for allopathy), who regarded Veeresalingam as his guru, said :

"It was in the summer recess of 1919, that my guru arrived to stay on the first floor of 'Veda Vilas', the residential quarters of Mr. Komarrazu (Lakshmana Rao). He was accompanied by Mangamma, the young widow, whom he brought up and an old man-servant. The Master was very weak, thin, and was sustained on a diet of parched rice soaked in milk. He was always found writing, whenever he could pick up the strength to do so, in an attempt to complete the third volume of his autobiography. Though his hand was seen to be a little shaky, his mind was quite sharp and alert. The Master was a man of great will power, not given to doubts or hesitation. He was not in the habit of writing in rough to be fair-copied later. Whatever he wrote was fair, with no need for correcting a single letter or revising the lines here and there."

More personal details of Veeresalingam's residence at 'Veda Vilas' in Egmore are given by G. Venkatananda Raghava Rao, young law student, who happened to stay at the same place at that time. The place was under the control of Komararazu Lakshmana Rao, who, as Dewan of Munagala, was looking after the interests of the estate in a longstanding legal dispute pending disposal in the Madras High Court. The research scholar that he essentially was, he was also pursuing his literary activity, connected mainly with the Vijnana Chandrikaa Grantha Mandali, alongside. It was he who had prevailed upon Veeresalingam to bring out a revised edition of the second volume of his *Lives of the Telugu Poets*, with additions, whenever necessary. He had arranged for his stay at his 'Veda Vilas' residence for completion of this project.

In the first week of May 1919, Lakshmana Rao had to leave Madras, along with his family, for the headquarters of the estate in Andhra (Gudem in Krishna District). The dispute had just been decided by the High Court in favour of the Zamindar of Munagala, and follow-up action at the total level was necessary.

Settling himself in the rooms on the first floor of the house,

Veeresalingam set about the task of revising the second volume of the *Lives of the Telugu Poets*. The author of the account, G. V. Raghava Rao, who had just then won a prize in an essay contest on the *Development of Telugu Prose*, (organised by the Chennapuri Andhra Sabha), was engaged in further research on the subject. On the advice and encouragement of Lakshmana Rao, he was looking for more data at the Oriental Manuscripts Library. The following is a brief paraphrase of the author's account in Telugu (originally published in the monthly periodical, *Bharati*, in 1973) :—

Scarcely had Veeresalingam completed writing 14 pages about Sri Krishna Deva Raya (in the *Lives of the Poets*), when his attention was diverted to another direction.

An article on the birth place of the Telugu poet Bammara Potaraju (identified with the present Ontimitta) was received by the *Andhra Patrika* office for publication in their annual number for 1919, still in press. The Editor of the *Andhra Patrika* sent a copy of that article in galley proof to Veeresalingam Pantulu with an offer to publish his comment on it, if he would like to send him one. He agreed to do so and began to work upon his own article.

Before he could complete the article, Veeresalingam began to run high temperature, which developed, into a malignant fever, with signs of influenza. He was being treated by Dr. Lakshmi pati.

The rest of the story is better told in the author's (G. V. Raghava Rao's) own words :—

“Despite the fever, Pantulu garu managed to complete the article and send the manuscript through me to the *Andhra Patrika* office. Within a couple of days, the rough proof was ready. When I took it to him, his fever had shot up to about 104°F and he seemed in an acute state of discomfort; water dripping from the corners of his eyes. Unwilling to bother him in that condition, I put it gently to him : ‘Sir ! The proof is ready. Can I read it for you ?’

"No. Please put it here. I shall read it myself", was his reply.

"You are having high fever. I shall read, if you could listen. I shall correct it, as you direct me to do. I submit that you should not unduly strain yourself now", I rejoined.

"I won't be satisfied if others read it. I must read my own proof. It won't be much of a strain. Please give it here", so saying, he took the galley proof from my hand. Putting his glasses on, he began to correct the proof. The picture of the great man remains vivid in my mind's eye. Taking out the fountain-pen in his trembling hands, he began to peruse the proof, stifling the tears trickling from his eyes, which seemed too tired for the work, and disregarding the high fever.

On my return from the library by about five in the evening (on 26 May 1919) I saw Dr. Lakshmiapati busy with a mortar and pestle, grinding something very pungent.

"What is it you are grinding, Doctor ?", was my query.

"Muck and pure alcohol", he replied. I stood dumb-founded.

"It is no use your standing thus", put in the doctor. "I am not sure if Pantulu garu will survive this night. Please rush these telegrams to the post office and after your meal, hurry up to Mylapore and fetch Nageswara Rao Pantulu along with you, with the least delay." He handed me a five-rupee note.....

".....It was nine o'clock in the night by the time Nageswara Rao Pantulu and I reached Veda Vilas.... Nageswara Rao Pantulu rushed into the sick room, and greeting Veeresalingam Pantulu with folded hands, said : "At your service, Sir". To which the latter struggled to make a reply, but with no success.... The doctor was busy for the best part of the night, administering drugs and injections to the patient every now and then.... In the intervals, there were musings by the doctor on the mystery

of life and death and references to Addison's. *The Vision of Mirza*. About 3 A.M. the doctor gave yet another injection, but the patient did not seem to respond. We kept the vigil and it was approaching 4 A.M.

"Now I am giving him what I suppose will be the last thing we can give him...yes, this is the last", said the doctor, mixing a spoon each of milk and water with the drug and administering the liquid to the patient. It went down the throat, raising some hope in us who were fearing that it might not.

"By God's grace, he might pull through, after all. Now that the medicine had gone in", said I. "It had gone in, but there is no hope. He is fast sinking", remarked the doctor.

"We became silent, keeping our eyes on Veeresalingam garu all the time. The breathing was becoming heavier. At the end, we could hear a feeble sigh with two low gurgling sounds. And then he breathed his last. It was twenty minutes past four in the morning. The date was 27 May 1919.

"Dr. Lakshmipati smeared the dead body with some medicinal herbs, mixed with turmeric paste. 'I have had no rest for a week. I must get going', said the doctor, leaving the place. 'I must think of the leading article in the paper and look for the block of Veeresalingam', said Nageswara Rao Pantulu, getting up to go. I was left alone to keep vigil near the dead man's body".

Attempts were made to take the body of Veeresalingam to Rajahmundry, but with no success. It was thereupon decided to cremate it in Madras. C. Bhanumurti and Nageswara Rao Pantulu were among the leading pall-bearers. A Brahmo Samaj worker from Bengal accompanied the funeral procession with devotional songs. Before the pyre was ceremonially lit, there were many funeral orations by the admirers present, paying their last homage to the leader. C. Seshagiri Rao, Editor of the *Andhra Patrika*, described him as a great savant of Andhra and the harbinger of a new age. Umakanta Vidyasekhar who was a successor to

Veeresalingam's post in Presidency College, wondered how we could remember him merely as a poet, scholar, thinker or social reformer, when he was all these in one and much more. Many others joined the chorus of tributes, echoing the sentiments of the earlier speakers.

Komarrazu Lakshmana Rao, on hearing the sad news, wrote to the author (G. V. Raghava Rao) from his native village, Nadigudem : "I am unable to express my feelings... I never thought that the great man would be no more before I could return to Madras. The Telugu world has no doubt suffered irreparable loss, but my personal loss is heavy..... I am so sorry that I was of no use to him in his last days....."

The ashes of Veeresalingam were later sent to Rajahmundry to be interned near the *samadhi* of his wife. The place for his own *samadhi* had already been chosen by him. On the spot now stands an inscribed monument in marble. In death, as in life, the partnership of the two great souls continues as an unfailing source of inspiration to the onlookers.

Pioneer in Modern Telugu Literature—1

IT WILL NOT be a matter for surprise if Veeresalingam is known to most people outside Andhra mainly as a pioneer of widow marriage. But, on a final reckoning, he was something more than that. He was the prime architect of the Renaissance of Telugu literature in the latter half of the last century, as well as a vital force in the rejuvenation of social life in Andhra. He was the hero as a poet and as a man of action, of whom Carlyle might have grown eloquent if only he had heard of him.

As a writer, in prose as well as in verse, he was incredibly versatile, invariably enterprising and often remarkably original. He was possibly the first, certainly one of the first, to try his hand at many of the modern art forms in Telugu. All of these are so familiar to the reader of today, some of them having proved increasingly popular through the years. There were a number of firsts to his credit. He wrote the first burlesque, the first parody in verse, the first sustained satire in prose, the first social play, the first full-length novel (with a social theme, in the accepted modern sense), the first pieces in biography and the first detailed autobiography in prose. We have his own word, too, on this.

Possibly, he had many other 'firsts' in the writing line to his credit. But it is no mere chronological precedence that lends distinction to his work. It was given to him not only to use literature as a potent weapon of social reform, but to bring its

language out of the stilted and bookish poetic diction of an earlier day. In his hands it came closer to the currency of everyday life, so as to be understood by a man of average intelligence and literacy. At the risk of being accused by the pandits of the day of degrading literature, he paid the highest attention to social purpose in the choice of the theme and to popular appeal in the mode of treatment.

His literary output was impressive in volume and variety, particularly striking in view of his crowded life of action, in which he had to fight on many fronts. There was no form of writing left untouched by him. The list of his titles well exceeds a hundred. There were translations and adaptations from English and Sanskrit, as well as original plays, modern experiments in prose and exercises in traditional verse, handbooks on science, geography and history for children, as also the volumes of political biography and literary criticism for the adults.

Broad Farces

Whatever he was engaged in writing, from time to time, the one thing always uppermost in Veeresalingam's mind was the need to highlight the evils prevalent in the society around him. He used his essays, published in *Vivekavardhini* and lectures (which he always took care to write out in advance), delivered in Rajahmundry and other towns, for this purpose. A novel form that he adapted to good effect, in this connection, was the short play in prose, which he called *prahasanam*. True to its name, it is always in the lighter vein, meant to provoke laughter among the audience. Entertainment, pure and simple, was not, however, its aim, it was to reform the wrongdoer through ridicule. The burlesque form was quite effectively used in the West by French play-wrights like Moliere and satirists like Voltaire, with whom Veeresalingam was probably familiar through translations in English.

The number of *prahasanams* written by Veeresalingam exceeds forty. Widely varying in size and subject-matter, they are in the nature of broad farces, and presented as such on the

stage, with lots of topical references and local allusions. They were immensely enjoyed by the audience of the day, who must have been only too familiar with the situations and characters in the original.

In *Braahma Vivaaham* (popularly known in the town as *Peddayyagaari Pelli Pustakam*, which literally means a "book of the old man's marriage") he exposed to the public gaze the practice of child marriage and the marriage of young girls to old men. This was done for a price, of course, all in the name of tradition, among members of the higher castes, in particular. The misdeeds of government officials (especially of the judiciary) and lawyers were sharply highlighted in *Vyavahaara Dharmabodhini*, (popularly known as "Pleader Naatakam"). The blundering attitudes of boastful orthodoxy become the target in *Dambhaachaarya Vilasanamu*. The stupidity and obscurantism of some of the leading citizens are laid bare in *Tiryag Vidwan Mahasabha* (Congregation of Scholar-beasts). In this is also ridiculed the needless fuss about trifling matters relating to the funeral rites of a person (identified as his friend Desiraju Peda Bapaiah). *Maha Aranyapura Aadhipatyam* (literally, "Overlordship of the great Jungle-city") is an eloquent commentary on the unseemly scramble for leadership among the eminent men in society who fight one another like beasts of prey.

The institution of concubinage, involving the class of professional dancing girls patronised by the wealthy and influential in society, figures prominently in many of these plays. The dialogue is spiced with mock-serious arguments in defence of the "useful" role of concubines and the artistic value of nautch parties. In one play (entitled *Kalipurusha Shanaiswara Vilaasam*), the author puts the following words in the mouth of the celestial character, Shani, in reply to the fears expressed by his human devotee on the hazards of contact with the prostitutes :

"Don't you fear. The gods are immune from it. As they have no wedded wives of their own, they are free to enjoy others...Our bodies know no disease. When death itself is conquered by nectar, what of disease?"

The irony here is obvious, with all its implications. Many of the ruling superstitions of Hindu orthodoxy and their basis in traditional myths and legends are held up to ridicule. The spectator's interest lies as often in the ludicrous characters as in the absurd situations. Names like Ganika Prananaatha Rao, Dhana-pala, Gana Priya, Sangeeta Rao, Annapurnamma, Ajnaanamma etc., need no explanation on the basic traits of the characters. They serve as labels, reminding us of some of the characters created by Shakespeare's contemporaries including Ben Jonson, Kid and Marlowe, Beaumont and Fletcher, Dekker and Massinger.

More often than not they are mere social types, familiar and easily identifiable, rather than real characters, with an individuality of their own. But then, they serve the author's purpose well enough by coming in handy as mouthpieces of different kinds. We almost always laugh at them, hardly ever with them. Not unexpected this when we remember what we have here before us—a broad farce, not a refined comedy. They are also easily dated, like most plays whose interest is sustained by the preoccupation with specific social problems. To Veeresalingam, however, goes the pioneer's credit for popularising the burlesque form in Telugu, the possibilities of which were later more thoroughly exploited by his followers like Chilakamarti.

Plays

Apart from these admittedly propagandist pieces, about whose intrinsic appeal no one need have any illusions, Veeresalingam has quite a few serious plays, some of which have a rightful claim to literary merit. They could be roughly divided into three broad categories—translations or adaptations from English plays; translations from the Sanskrit classics; and original plays, mostly based on mythological themes.

Along with many other lovers of the dramatic art in Andhra, Veeresalingam received a new impetus in the production, as well as the writing, of plays from the visit of the troupe of the Parsi players from Dharwar. They were in Rajahmundry in 1880, staging their plays which were striking in their novelty and

realism. On their departure, the makeshift stage theatre was left behind for others to use, if they could. This was an unforeseen opportunity for local talent and Veeresalingam's *Chamatkaara Ratnavali* (an adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors*) was the first play staged here. The translation was entirely in prose and Veeresalingam took some liberties with the original in changing the names of places and persons. The Duke of Ephesus, for instance, becomes Dharmapala of Cholamandalam, Antipholus becomes Vasantaka, and so on, in the translator's attempt to create the impression of an original play, suited to Indian conditions. The dialogue is easy and the play was frequently produced.

In translating *The Merchant of Venice*, he chose to be closer to the original and retained all the names as they were, rendering the English blank verse in Telugu *dwipada* metre, which he probably considered its nearest equivalent. This metrical experiment was later given up in favour of plain prose, as it was obviously not considered quite satisfactory. Veeresalingam was later attracted by the plays of Sheridan, two of which, *Duenna*, and *The Rivals*, he rendered respectively as *Raaga Manjari* (1885) and *Kalyana Kalpavalli* (1894). His own critical temperament must have favourably responded to the bright comedy of manners, with its witty dialogue and intriguing situations.

Many are the scholars and poets in Telugu who had attempted to capture the beauty and grandeur of the Sanskrit classics, but few can claim full success. Veeresalingam never prided himself on his scholarship in Sanskrit, though he had more than a passing acquaintance with the language and its literature. It was with a commendable self-confidence, tempered by an element of genuine humility, that he approached Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, the delight of readers, the world over, but the despair of translators in every age. Doing it over a period of years from 1875 to 1883, he was not altogether dissatisfied with the end-product, which had pleased most of his friends and admirers. It was, perhaps, not as faithful in its verbal accuracy as the work of

erudite scholars like Vedam Venkataraya Sastri, for instance. Nor sensitive and evocative enough to match the delicate touches and lofty heights of Kalidasa's poetry.

But it had two undoubted merits, which cannot be denied to it even by the least sparing of critics. Easy readability was one and presentability on the stage was another. Despite a multiplicity of Telugu translations Veeresalingam's had long remained the most popular with actors as well as readers. In rendering two of the most famous slokas (Dushyanta's *Anaaghraatam Pushpam* and sage Kanva's *Yaasyatyadya Sakuntaleti*), the translator had obviously done his best to capture the beauty and tenderness of the original in as simple a Telugu verse as possible.

The same technique was adopted by him in translating another of Kalidasa's plays *Maalavikaagnimitram*. If its impact on the playminded public was not comparable to that of the previous one, the reason is best sought in the intrinsic difference between the originals of the two plays. Anyone who has a chance to read or hear the translation of the short *sloka* beginning *Puraanamityeva na saadhu sarvam* would think twice before pointing his finger at the Telugu poet. In dealing with Sri Harsha's *Ratnaavali*, Veeresalingam strictly followed the classical pattern, in language as well as form. A sense of decorum was evident in the wonted reticence adopted by him, resisting the popular temptation to expatiate on the attributes of the translator concerned through the medium of the *Sutradhaara's Prastaavana* (preface by the chorus).

Krishna Mishra's *Prabodha Chandrodhayam* is heavily marked by spiritual symbolism, the characters being represented by Gita, Upanishad, Moha, Viveka etc., and the dialogue held above the ordinary mundane level. All of which are factors not likely to admit of a straight and simple translation, as in some of the other plays. All the intellectual resources of a philosopher were called for, in addition to the imagination of a poet, in tackling this complex task. Luckily for Veeresalingam, who would be equal to any challenge in his line, he was not found wanting. The result had to be different, because the weapons were different.

Of the three original plays composed in Telugu by Veeresa-

lingam, the theme of Satya Harichandra must have had a compelling appeal for him as it had for Gandhi in a different context. In his own personal life, he never let himself give the second place to truth, in the face of the greatest dangers that might befall him. It was always the strait and narrow path for him. He was not against Hindu mythology as such, but only against its misuse and misinterpretation. He loved the ethics associated with it, not the miracles.

In taking up the story of Harishchandra, he rationalised its basic elements and humanised the incidents, keeping the supernatural out of the main structure. He had, of course, to make a formal concession to the stage convention by allowing the Lord (Shiva) and his consort to appear at the end of it, so as not to disappoint the expectations of the more devout among the spectators of his day. But the function of divinity had undergone a material change. It stands here for a benediction; not for the *deus ex machina*, as of old. The story does not need miracles and gods to rescue itself. The audience might still need the latter for its own reassurance.

In characterisation too, the author brought his own mind to bear on the traditional conception. Restraint is typical of the main characters. The author's emphasis is on the values of *Dharma* and the sentiment of *Karuna*. In dramatising Sankara Kavi's narrative story of Harischandra, Veeresalingam toned down much of the crudity in the devices for comic relief as also the incredible brutality evident in the incidents relating to the ordeals undergone by the hero and the heroine. The epilogue (*Bharata Vakyā*) is utilised for emphasising the ethical aspect of the story. This play was known to have been very popular with readers and spectators, despite the complaint of some latter-day critics about the dialogues of learned length with a heavy admixture of verse (*padayams* meant for recitation). It is worth noting, in this connection, that the version of Baliyepalli Lakshmikantam, which was to supersede it, in due course, in popular favour, has even a greater proportion of verse for mass appeal and has less of literary merit.

The character of Hiranyakasipu in Veeresalingam's *Prahlaada Naatakam* is very different from the stage villain of popular imagination—the blood-thirsty demon-king and ranting swashbuckler. He is a figure of considerable dignity—a responsible ruler, a considerate brother, a loving husband, an affectionate father and a steadfast man of faith. Like the tragic heroes of Shakespeare, he has a single fatal weakness, amidst his many virtues. It is represented here by his implacable opposition to the religion of Vishnu. Even in going down before the force of the Almighty, he does not become clumsy or ridiculous, but he exhibits a degree of courage and self-confidence worthy of a tragic hero. Lord Narasimha is not half as vengeful or terrible as he is supposed to be. It must have gladdened the heart of Veeresalingam, the man of true faith, to present this *avatar* of Vishnu, moralising on the virtues of true devotion and its superiority to all forms of religious ostentation.

If the Mahabharata had long been a favourite epic of the Andhras, the story of *Dakshina Gograhanam* from *Virata Parva* was certainly one of the more popular sections. In his play on this theme, Veeresalingam makes a significant departure, not so much in the development of the story as in the depiction of character and in the expression of sentiment. His generally high regard for the virtues of women gets translated here in his conception of the character of Sudheshna, wife of King Virata and sister of the villain Keechaka (or Mahabala), who dies a gruesome death at the hands of Bheema. Freed from the conventional female attributes of jealousy and blatant partiality, she appears here as a figure mainly of pathos in her bereavements, unflinching in the devotion to her lord and master and considerate to those who had done her wrong, when they find themselves thrown at her mercy. This is achieved by the playwright without taking any undue liberties with the main events of the Mahabharata story.

It is not unlikely that Veeresalingam had benefited substantially from a study of the plays of Shakespeare and other Western masters. But, steeped in the Indian tradition as he was, he did nothing to go against its spirit, in the presentation of character.

He certainly learned, in due course, the art of rounding off the angularities, where necessary, in softening the acerbities and in looking at persons and situations in the correct perspective of his personal ethics.

Novel and Satire

In prose, as in verse, versatility was the notable feature of Veeresalingam. As a prose-writer, he tried his hand at a wide variety of forms, introducing some of them presumably for the first time in Telugu. It is with the novel form, however, that he is most closely associated in this connection. Time was when it used to be claimed by enthusiasts, with no fear of contradiction, that his *Rajasekhara Charitram*, published in book form in 1880 (after serialisation in 1878), was the very first Telugu novel. One has, in more recent times, to reckon with one or two other claimants to this title. (Kokkonda Venkataratnam Pantulu's *Mahaasweta*, and Narahari Gopalakrishnamma Chetti's *Sri Ranga-raja Charitra* published in 1872.) Questions of chronological precedence apart, there could be little doubt about the fact that *Rajasekhara Charitram* is a work of great literary distinction and had stood the test of time. It continues to be readable to this day, nearly a century after it was written. If it was not the first novel in Telugu, it was certainly the first social novel in the language, as it is understood in the modern sense. It is still remembered, while many others are forgotten.

On the author's own admission, it was inspired by the model of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. But it was far from being a mere translation or even a narrow adaptation of the English classic. Except for a general similarity in the basic traits of a few characters and in the occurrence of one or two incidents, there was not much in common between the two novels. That *Rajasekhara Charitram* was an original work, in its own right, was amply demonstrated, when it was brought out in an English translation by the Rev. T. R. Hutchinsson, under the title *Fortune's Wheel*. In a brief notice of the book, published in London in 1887, *The Times* observed that :

“.....the pictures of Hindu domestic life, religious ideas, mode of worship and superstitions, and the condition of women with denial of all rights of choice in marriage, are so well drawn and illustrated that the book will have a charm for all readers.”

It is, in fact, highly regarded among the Telugu readers for the vivid light it throws on contemporary social life in Andhra. The story is a fairly simple one. Rajasekhara, the hero, is a prosperous middle class man of some learning and culture, living happily with his family—wife, two daughters and a son. He runs into debt, having spent too lavishly on the daughter's marriage, owing to his love of ostentation and inadequate understanding of the value of money. In the frantic attempt to repay the debt and repair his fortunes he finds himself in the tempting embrace of an alchemist, but ends up by throwing away real gold and silver in search of the false. For consolation, Rajasekhara goes on a pilgrimage to Varanasi and on his way back, encounters new friends and strange experiences, including the kidnapping of his younger daughter by some miscreants. Through the machinations of a villain who pretends to be a well-wisher but later tries to blackmail him, he is locked up in the King's prison for no fault of his. But luckily for him, help comes from unexpected quarters. The son who enters the service of the local ruler rescues him in time and the King, no other than the unknown friend, amply rewards him for all his troubles and enables him to get back all that he had lost and more. And he lives happily ever after, with his family and friends.

The story may not be particularly remarkable in itself. But there are one or two notable features that stand out in a study of this novel. From the traditional preoccupation with mythology, legend and romance among the writers of the day, we have come down here to social life in all its realism. The prince of noble birth, who used to be the traditional hero of the *Prabandhas* and the *Kavyas* had given place here to the average householder, so familiar in life to the contemporary reader. The story proceeds and develops on its own momentum, on the basis of man's

relations with other men and with nature, needing no miracles to intercede for salvaging him from desperate situations. The good man suffers, not from the wrath of God or a holy saint, but due to his own weakness—mainly in the shape of vulnerability to flattery and propensity to live beyond his means for love of ostentation. He can be taken as a symbol of the age of feudalism—of unearned incomes and unproductive avocations. The good man comes out the ordeal in good shape, because it was the author's belief that if providence was just, virtue was bound to win in the end.

More than for the ethical values implicit, and at times rather explicit, in this story, the novel is memorable for the mirror it holds up to the contemporary Hindu society, with particular reference to the Brahmin families of the Godavari delta. The even tenor of domestic life, proceeding from convention to convention, the traditional customs of orthodox Hindu marriage, the practice of child marriage and the problems arising from it, popular superstitions about alchemy and witchcraft, as also about omens and horoscopes, the harmless, if somewhat salty, gossip of the females at the riverside, the sectarianism of religious groups, the hollowness of the holy men, the evil of untouchability and a host of other pictures spring to life. It is vivid portrait of pre-capitalist, feudal society in Andhra.

The language used here is, of course, bookish but a close approximation to cultured speech, without actually being the spoken, as we understand it now. When it borders on the high-flown, it does not appear out of place, as in the graphic description of the Godavari, taking birth at Nasik near the shrine of Triyambaka, which occurs at the very beginning. The novel opens with a bang, and sustains the tempo all through.

Another novel that he wrote was *Satyavatee Charitra*, meant specially to be read by women. It sought to highlight the value of women's education in building a happy home. It compares the life of an educated and cultured couple with that of the others of whom only one of the partners happens to be educated. The heroine, Satyavati, proved so popular among the readers as the female archetype that admiring mothers used to name their

children after her. The novel had quite a vogue in that generation. Besides its being prescribed for study in some governmental examinations, it came to be translated into some of the other South Indian languages. The style was simple and the story well told. But the obviously didactic intent limited its artistic appeal.

A more ambitious experiment that he attempted in the novel form was *Satya Rajaa Poorvadesa Yaattralu* (literally meaning "The Eastern travels of the King of Truth"). Closely modelled on Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, it is really a piece of sustained social satire, in fictional form. The first part, entitled *Aadu Malayalam*, sets out to describe the hero's strange experiences in the imaginary land of Malabar, where the women are supposed to have the upper hand over the men, reminding the reader of Gulliver's experiences in the land of the Lilliputs. The author employs the weapon of irony and sarcasm with devastating effect throughout the novel.

On disembarking from the ship on the Malabar coast, the hero, Satya Raja, finds himself in a society, where everything appears topsy-turvy to his eyes. All the public offices are held by women, including that of the magistrate, the jailor and the police, while the poor menfolk look after the homes and are valued mainly for their domestic virtues of obedience and fidelity. *Patneevratam* (loyalty to wife) is held to be the highest virtue, like *Paativratyam* (loyalty to husband) elsewhere. A widowed man runs the risk of having his nose cut off (*Naasikaa khandanam*), just as a widowed woman elsewhere runs the risk of having her hair cut off (*kesa khandanam*) in orthodox Hindu society. Any attempt to educate men by starting schools for them is feared as a dangerously revolutionary step just as the plea for women's education by the advocates of reform was feared by the social diehards in Andhra. Veeresalingam's idea here was obviously to expose the glaring absurdity of the position taken by the latter by 'sitting the truth on its head' for everyone to see and understand.

In *Lanka Dweepam* (or *The Island of Ceylon*), to which the hero transports himself, in the second part of the travels, with

the aid of a magic herb applied to his feet, as it happens in one of the popular works of Telugu poetry, *Manucharitra*, we get a picture corresponding to the land of the Brobdingnags, described by Swift. Despite his miniscule size, compared to that of the local inhabitants, the hero is able to hold his own among the latter, by his knowledge of astrology and allied sciences aided by his shrewd commonsense and natural intelligence. We are treated here to apparently learned, but basically wrongheaded, discussions on astrology, astronomy and similar subjects, that should help anyone reading between the lines to see the irrational character of many of the Hindu beliefs in omens and other superstitions. The entertainment value of the flowing narrative notwithstanding, an impression of facile oversimplification by the author, of a whole set of social values inherent in a religious system, cannot be helped by the more sophisticated reader.

The book is better appreciated as a satire in prose than as a novel considered as a work of art in itself. The incidents do not always follow in a natural sequence, but are pushed about, one after the other, by the guiding hand that controls the whole puppet-show. There is not the same unspoken inevitability about the anecdotes nor the unquestioned credibility about the characters, as one might expect in a novel read as such.

Pioneer in Modern Telugu Literature—2

V EERESALINGAM COULD BE informative as well as entertaining. There are not many other writers like him in any language, who could feel equally at home in the literature of information and in the literature of emotion. He broke new ground in Telugu in introducing to its soil the seeds of scientific knowledge of the West, hitherto available only in English and the other European languages. His own knowledge of English might not have been of the highest, but he had a certain sureness of grasp that enabled him to understand Darwin and Huxley. He took a lot of trouble in coining the technical terms necessary for the books on biology, zoology, physiology and other sciences that he brought out for the benefit of students.

This was in addition to the concise volumes on *Tarka* (logic), *Vyaakarana* (grammar) and *kaavya* (poetics), that he had already published. His books on the natural and physical sciences, which were written long before the trend to replace those in English was envisaged, had laid the foundation for adoption of the mother-tongue as the medium of instruction. He wrote a large number of instructive essays on topics relating to patriotism, good conduct, personal character, public and private ethics and so on. The lectures he delivered on political subjects, including the role of the Indian National Congress, and problems of social reform were all in the form of essays that he wrote out beforehand.

Whether it was meant for the platform or the periodical, the

essay in his hands had evolved certain recognisable characteristics, some of which were : clarity of analysis; lucidity of exposition; balanced assessment of the pros and cons; and a definite and unambiguous conclusion. In his lectures, as in his essays, his main endeavour was to put his ideas across to the listener or the reader, as directly and as effectively as possible. There was, therefore, no place in them for words or word-compounds "of learned length and thundering sound". When Sanskrit *slokas* had to be quoted in support of an argument or to illustrate a point, he always took care to explain them in simple Telugu to help those who did not follow the classical language. When expressions foreign to Telugu had to be used, he tried to adapt them to the harmony of vowel sequence peculiar to Telugu, so that they might not stand out too glaringly as alien importations.

Biography and Autobiography

Though he wrote the brief lives of Indian worthies like Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Pandit Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar and the rulers of native states like Baroda and Mysore, Veeresalingam can be said to have achieved unqualified distinction in giving us an account of his own life. His *Sweeya Charitra*, in two volumes running to a total of over eight hundred pages is indeed a monumental work, unlikely to be equalled for a long time to come. If we accept the truth of Lytton Strachey's dictum that it is as difficult to write a good life as to live one, Veeresalingam should be conceded the palm for writing a good life as well as for living a difficult one. It was an eventful life, full of struggle and success, of battles fought and victories won, not without its share of defeats and disillusionments.

The main features of Veeresalingam's autobiography are readability, accuracy and objectivity, along with a clarity of social perspective. It remains a most absorbing human document in the Telugu language. With no conscious striving for effect, the narrative style achieves a tempo that sustains the readers' interest from beginning to end. There is no deliberate attempt at dramatisation of any of the events in his life but they come upon the

reader's mind with a natural impact and an easy grace. For the simple reason that there is so much of high drama in the life itself. Here was indeed a man, with the makings of a hero from his childhood.

In striving for accuracy, Veeresalingam might sometimes make the reader feel that he is loading the account with what strikes one apparently as a lot of inconsequential detail. But he is always sure of his facts as his memory seldom fails him. He makes no statements unsupported by data. He is aided by his diary, which he kept for the better part of his life. He indulges in few generalisations that could be challenged by others. Even when he is deeply involved in the episodes, some of which might be of a controversial nature, he is capable of a high degree of objectivity in dealing with them.

He took credit for himself for the risks he had run and the courage he had shown in times of crisis, just as he would concede to others what was their due. He was not unaware of the faults in his own make-up nor did he ignore or minimise the mistakes committed by himself. He spoke frequently of his impatience, irascible temperament and bluntness of speech that could at times alienate friends and coworkers even as they put off admiring strangers. He was aware of his own errors of judgment, especially in pinning his faith to persons who could not be relied upon. But there was no instance of his having let down any one who had depended on him.

The few confessions made in his autobiography are similar to those in Gandhi's *Story of My Experiments with Truth*. One of them relates to what might be treated by others as a matter of minor importance, but which he considered a serious lapse from truth. For this, he felt genuinely penitent in later life. He wanted to appear, when he was in his late teens, for a public examination qualifying for posts carrying a salary exceeding Rs. 20 a month in government service. The minimum age limit for this was the completion of eighteen years, but he fell short of it by a few months. The incident is best related in his own words :

“Though I was not sure of the year of my birth, not having seen my birth certificate (or horoscope), I was not unaware of the fact that I had not yet completed eighteen years. But in my boyish enthusiasm, I did not like to miss the chance of appearing that year for the examination, in applying for which I remember to have mentioned my age as nineteen or so.

“Notwithstanding the fact that I produced a medical Certificate in support... I realise that I am not absolved from the guilt. The same year I passed both the language tests, standing second in the list of successful candidates from the Northern Circars. Neither my success in the test nor the certificate given by a qualified medical officer could minimise my lapse from truth.

“This was, I believe, the only instance of falsehood deliberately indulged in by me in those days. I often felt remorse for this lapse...”

That the autobiography of a public man should not be an excuse for the unrestricted indulgence of his ego is a view that was never lost sight of by Veeresalingam. His *Sweeya Charitra* is not, therefore, a disjointed collection of memories and thoughts about himself and the men around him. On the other hand, it is a well-knit account giving the reader an insight into the motives of his own actions and a commentary on the forces at work in the society of his day. This is not to say that every page of the book is of absorbing interest. There are whole sections in it, like details of membership of some associations and the articles of the trust deed, that could either be dropped with no material loss to the narrative, or conveniently relegated to the appendix. This is a kind of autobiography that would only stand to gain by intelligent editing.

It may or may not rank with the world's great autobiographies. But one could confidently state that even if Veeresalingam had written only this book and nothing else in his life, he would still be a writer to reckon with in modern Telugu literature.

Literary Biographies

The other great work, a product of his more mature period, on which he could willingly stake his reputation, is *Andhra Kavula Charitra* (Lives of the Telugu Poets) in two volumes. This is a pioneering work in more senses than one. Books of literary history and literary criticism in the modern sense, did not exist eighty to ninety years ago, when he embarked on his research project. Research itself was unheard of in those days and facilities for interested scholars to do research were hard to come by. The books available on the poets were few and far between. The only one well-known book, written before Veeresalingam's had to make do with whatever information was available on the subject. It was, therefore, more in the nature of an indiscriminate collection of legends and myths and other stories of unverified data than a reliable account of facts useful to scholars.

Many a hurdle had to be crossed by Veeresalingam, before he could get at the source material to work upon. Most of the literary classics before his time were available only in the form of palm leaf manuscripts. And they had to be consulted only in a few places in the Presidency—the Madras Government Oriental Manuscripts Library at Madras and the Saraswati Mahal Library at Thanjavur. Besides, there were a few private collections, with individual owners. He had a notebook, in which he had taken down notes for over a month in Madras. But, as ill luck would have it, he lost it in a tramcar, never to be recovered for love or money. His description of this incident in the introduction to the printed volumes makes pathetic reading.

The two main tasks faced by him in the compilation of the Lives of the Poets were : fixing the chronology of the poets and evaluating the work of each poet in an objective and dispassionate manner. The first of them would fall in the category of historical research and the second of literary criticism.

Neither of these tasks was easy, if it was to be done in a conscientious, if not conclusive, manner. While paucity of relevant data would render the first even more difficult than it could otherwise be, excess of uncertain material would make the second

a somewhat slippery job. When we remember the practice of Telugu poets, in keeping with the Indian tradition in all creative arts, to speak more about their work than about themselves, sometimes nothing at all about the latter, the problem is rendered all the more difficult of solution. The Telugu poet of the old days was apt to be more outgoing about the *Kriti Bharta* (the person to whom a book is dedicated) than about the *Kriti Karta* (the author of the book). When the dedication happens to be to a family god, as it sometimes did, it was probably a gain to religious devotion or idealism rather than to chronology. Even otherwise, the search for reliable chronology could well be a wild goose chase.

The research scholar working in this field would not be deemed to be fully equipped for his task, if he was only well-read in literature or history. He should be something of an epigraphist who could read the inscriptions on stone or copper plate, and know how to sort out the possible contradictions between one kind of evidence and another. From the gifts and endowments made by the rulers, their dates had to be fixed and from the reference to the kings in the *kavyas* the period of the poet could roughly be located. It may be only approximate, but never too accurate. Similar would be the case with their place of birth and personal details, if any, which could be inferred by reasoned guesswork.

The methods adopted by Veeresalingam have not been invalidated in later years, even where the conclusions are not found acceptable. The patience and perseverance, receptivity of mind and freedom from preconceived notions and hardened prejudices, evinced by Veeresalingam summed up just the right attitude required of a research worker. He had that degree of intellectual humility which would not let anything come in the way of changing his conclusions in the light of fresh material coming up in the search.

The function of literary criticism would involve the use of objective criteria and a well-defined scale of values in the assessment of any given body of work. Veeresalingam had evolved

his own personal aids to work in all these matters, for he did not choose to be too free with value judgments. He had his own sense of proportion too in allotting the space to each of the poets, to add to the limitations imposed by the available material.

In the first part of the *Lives of the Andhra Poets*, dealing with about 40 of them of the ancient period, and running to a total of more than six hundred pages, nearly half the space is taken up by the four great poets—Nannaya, Tikkana, Srinatha and Potana. This was, perhaps, as it should be, not only in view of the changing volume of available facts from poet to poet but of the corpus and quality of the work that went under his name. The number of verses quoted by the historian of the poets, by way of illustration, could, with profit be reduced. But his general assessment was seldom off the mark. The freedom from parochial affinities achieved by him, in the process of making literary judgments, and not quite equalled by his latter-day successors in the field, is remarkable in a man of his generation.

Not that *The Lives of the Andhra Poets* was altogether free from the attention of hostile critics. During his own lifetime, it proved a convenient target of attack for erudite scholars who were chary of helping him when their help was sought. It is understandable that some of his conclusions have since been superseded by those of others. But it would be difficult to think of any single writer who had not benefited substantially from Veeresalingam's work. A few of the later researchers might have been able to rise higher than Veeresalingam and to reach wider horizons. But they would be less than grateful to a worthy precursor in him, if they chose to forget the fact that they were, all the time, standing on his shoulders.

Prose Style

Despite his orthodox upbringing and traditional background of classical scholarship, Veeresalingam was able to evolve a remarkably flexible approach to the problem of language, as well as an unlimited receptivity to new ideas and modes of expression.

Two of his earliest exercises in verse (*Maarkandeya Satakam* and *Gopala Satakam*) were completely in the stereotyped pattern and did not give anyone an inkling of what was later to come out of him. Two other works (*Suddhaandhra Niroshya Nirvachana Naishadham* and *Suddhaandhrottara Ramayanam*) more substantial and ambitious in other ways, were also primarily an exhibition of metrical skill and linguistic acrobatics, so common among scholars of the day. He was obviously eager to demonstrate to the learned world outside that he was not incapable of passing any of the well-recognised tests in versification. He was intent upon proving his mettle and earning for himself a place in the learned world of scholars and poets.

He did the same in prose too, in composing *Vigraham* and *Sandhi* (from the famous *Panchatantra*) in the florid and high-flown style of Chinnaya Suri, who had done *Mitra Laabham* and *Mitra Bhedam*, the first two stories in the *Neetichandrika* series. In fact, he nearly succeeded in outdoing Chinnaya Suri in the strenuous game of sharpening one's own wits on the grindstone of classical diction. But that was far from being his principal aim in life as a poet or as a prose writer.

He had his own ideas on the role of language and the function of literature, which he was able to define with an increasing sense of precision and social purpose, with the passage of time and addition of experience. In a moment of loud thinking he noted :—

“What is the purpose of language? To enable men to convey their ideas to one another. And the purpose of books, written in the language? To bring those ideas within the reach of men in distant places and of the succeeding generations. Could that purpose be easily served by books like *Vigraham*? No. The average reader will not be able to follow its words and sentences, without the aid of dictionaries and the guidance of scholars. After going through all this trouble to get at the meaning, does he see anything new to learn from it? Nothing much, besides what he could find in the simple prose of *Panchatantra*. That being so, how should

a book be written? In a language within the easy reach of every reader. When I thought so to myself, I made up my mind to write thereafter in a simple style, unlike the one adopted for *Vigraham*. Not content to keep this thought to myself, I published it in the periodical."

He never allowed himself to lose sight of this aim in anything that he wrote later—poems and plays, originals or translations, satires and stories, essays and lectures. In some of them, he, no doubt, adopted the *graanthika* (classical and bookish) form of language, evidently to conform to the practice among the contemporary scholars. He, thereby, hoped to assure for them the kind of respectability, without which they could not then (as even now for that matter, in some of the universities) be approved for study in schools and colleges. But he always took care to see that he was understood by the average man of ordinary education, without any difficulty.

In the plays that he wrote, especially the *prahasanas* (the farcical comedies), Veeresalingam employed the colloquial form of expression for the dialogue. This he did as much to bring the theatre close to the life of the people as to make the dialogue realistic. His preference for the colloquial, which did not exclude even the slang, wherever it was felt necessary, has more to do with his belief in the vitality and power of the spoken word than with the stage convention followed by the Sanskrit playwrights, including Kalidasa. It is well-known that they made their heroes and other noble male-characters speak in chaste Sanskrit, leaving the female ones, not excluding the heroines, and the menial characters manage with Prakrit. Veeresalingam did, of course, believe in the theory of *Paatrchita Bhaasha* (the choice of the form of language suited to the character concerned). Urged by the vitalising effect of the spoken word, he went much farther than many of the contemporary playwrights of the classical school like Vedam Venkataraya Sastri and others, for instance.

Even when he chose to employ the *graanthika* form in his prose to good purpose Veeresalingam was not too dogmatic about

it, unlike Chinnaya Suri, the modern grammarian of classical prose. Not at all like Kokkonda Venkataratnam Pantulu, who is known to have made a fetish of classical Telugu through its use, in season and out of it. The occasions on which Veeresalingam had to cross swords with the latter were many and various. But on no other occasion could he have hoped for an easier and more unequivocal victory than when the Pandit exposed himself by his advocacy of the high-falutin of bookish prose for the newspapers and periodicals, not content with advocating it for the books of a literary character.

Veeresalingam had no two opinions about the prose style suitable for journalism. It had to be of the simplest and the most lucid, if it were to appeal to all classes of readership—the ordinary layman of average intelligence as well as the erudite scholar. Which meant that it should be a close approximation to the speech of everyday life, even if it were not an exact reproduction of it.

Veeresalingam maintained that not only the language of newspapers, but the language of books as well, should undergo a radical change. He argued that it was possible to write books in the spoken idiom (or *graamya*, literally meaning 'the language of the villager'). This feeling began to grow stronger in him as he grew older. Towards the fag-end of his life, in right earnest, he took up the idea of formulating a grammar of modern Telugu. Explaining himself, he said in the prefatory note :—

"Though I agree that books should generally be written in an easy style, of the conventional form, I believe that they could be written in the spoken idiom (*Graamya Bhaasha*) as well, depending upon the subject-matter and the context. All the (Telugu) grammars of old are meant only for the books of verse. As books of prose were then practically unknown, their rules and regulations were not obviously conducive to the growth of modern prose. I had often toyed with the idea of preparing a new grammar, different from the old, suited to the evolution of modern prose and the needs of

the present day. Also a work in prose (*lakshana kavya*), which could serve as a suitable illustration. But I wonder if one like me, old and feeble-bodied, could realise it; Maybe, nothing is impossible with the grace of God Almighty!"

The grace he looked up to was, no doubt, forthcoming, but not in the fullest measure. For he could only complete three pages before his day was done. In the general introduction that he set out to do in those pages could be seen his view of language, the composition of Telugu vocabulary and of prose style, as it was in vogue in his time. After referring, at some length, to the different elements in the Telugu vocabulary, classified as *tatsama* (Sanskrit words bodily incorporated in Telugu with little or no change), *tadbhava* (words of Sanskrit origin, altered to suit the sound sequence of Telugu) and *desi* (words of the native element, independent of Sanskrit), he discussed the nature of the *graamya* forms, in vogue among the illiterate folk in the countryside, some of which had been corrupted by misuse, and had, therefore, ceased to be accepted in polite usage. He observed :

"*Graamya* words, thus rendered impolite and obscure, are considered unworthy of being used in civilised works. But, we find that some of these words have been used by the ancient poets, whose authority we accept. We have, therefore, to take it that these (*i.e.* the *graamya* forms of speech) could profitably be used for the strengthening of local colour or specific sentiment (*rasa pushti*), in the dialogue of the illiterate characters, and in the farcical comedies in general, according to the needs of the situations. Some of them could be pressed into service even in the best of serious works in the interest of clarity of understanding and verbal accuracy. By the same token, there should be no difficulty in employing technical words of foreign origin, for the sake of lucidity, where they happen to have come into common usage."

He arrived at this conclusion at a period in Andhra, when the Spoken Telugu Movement was in full swing under the informed leadership of Gidugu Venkata Ramamurti Pantulu, who

dedicated the whole of his life to the idea that Spoken Telugu should be accepted as a suitable medium for literary expression. He was probably not much in favour of it in the initial stages, but soon veered round to it, convinced by the telling logic of Ramamurti's argument.

When a new society was formed in Rajahmundry (*Vartamaana Vyaavahaarika Bhaasha Pravartaka Samaajam*) to propagate this point of view under the initiative of Ramamurti Pantulu, it was of no small significance that Veeresalingam was elected as its first President. Nor was he content to be merely a nominal president. We have it on Ramamurti's authority that Veeresalingam publicly declared his intention to begin writing in the spoken idiom of Telugu (*Vyaavahaarika Bhaasha*), as soon he was through with the work on hand (the second edition of the *Lives of the Telugu Poets*). But that was not to be. For he was dead before the end of three months.

But we know the direction in which his mind had been moving. And we have before us the impressive corpus of his own writing, done over a period of almost half-a-century. His prose cannot be expected to be everybody's cup of tea. At least one distinguished scholar and critic, the late Dr. C. R. Reddy, with his well-known predilection for the classical school, would give a higher place to Chinnaya Suri as a stylist. It would, however, be only fair to admit that Veeresalingam did not consciously strive for a style of his own. He was much too busy for that.

He was too deeply involved in the battles of life, to think of choosing his phrases. He was also an incredibly fast writer. He wrote as he felt and there was little or no rewriting. He was possibly less learned than some of the contemporary scholars, less poetic than others. Gurazada Appa Rao was, perhaps, more incisive and original. But Veeresalingam surpassed most of them in the even flow and sustained quality of his prose. If it failed to reach great heights, it had few ups and downs. It had clarity, depth and a lasting impact. It marked a major watershed in the evolution of modern Telugu prose. Who could ask for more in a pioneer, with no signposts to follows?

The Path-Finder

WITH OVER A HUNDRED volumes in different branches of literature to his credit, Veeresalingam was no mere man of letters. He was essentially a man of action, whose words were in the nature of instruments for social action, direct or indirect. "Mere publication of books is of no use," he wrote in his diary, "what is more important and essential is the courage and readiness to put into effect what we believe to be true." It would be hard to think of another man of his generation in Andhra or elsewhere in the country, for whom thought, word and deed represented such a close and inseparable triad of human behaviour.

For him, to think was to act and to speak or to write was of no great relevance, if it did not serve as a vital link between the first two. As his famous disciple, Sir Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu, put it so vividly, "in a Luther whose words are half-battles for the true, there is a natural sequence between 'letters' and 'deeds'." Though his name is popularly associated with the movement for the marriage of child widows, what Veeresalingam really aimed at was reform of a more comprehensive character, social change of a much deeper significance. Where he discovered an old path that served his purpose, he widened it for others to follow. But more often than not, he broke new ground, where others could not trace a single furrow.

The task of the path-finder involves a variety of strenuous jobs, connected with "jungle-clearance". In the metaphorical and

picturesque words of another of his learned disciples, Dr. V. Ramakrishna Rao, Veeresalingam in his onward march of progress "had to fell down stifling trees, to burn up rank brushwood, to hunt down ravenous beasts, to destroy venomous reptiles, to bore impassable hills, to weed out pricking thorns".

There was no hurdle of any kind, human or other, that could daunt Veeresalingam in his path. He represented Carlyle's concept of the hero as reformer. For a man singled out by destiny to play this role, Veeresalingam was handicapped by quite a few personal disadvantages, in addition to many hostile circumstances. Harassed by incessant bouts of asthma from his childhood, that shook his rickety frame, he was anything but a man of robust health. But an unshakable faith in Providence, reinforcing his belief in the justness of his cause, gave him a sense of robust optimism.

If a normal man of intelligence is expected to know how best to use his talents and opportunities, the man of abnormal vision knows how to turn his handicaps into advantages. He must also have a flair for creating opportunities where there are none. To his poor health, Veeresalingam added the other handicap of proverbial shortness of temper. Not only could he not suffer fools gladly; he could not stand the sight of pleasant knaves and polite hypocrites, who abound in the cultured society, so called. A man of strong likes and dislikes, as also stronger convictions, he could hardly tolerate any difference of opinion on the course of action. A total conformity, not only in broad matters of principle and policy, but in the minutest details of his programme, was what he demanded of his colleagues and co-workers, as well as his lieutenants. Not exactly a promising factor in a situation where the need was for a growing band of enthusiasts everywhere !

While people were afraid of his sharp tongue and sharper looks in private relations, his platform manner was none too prepossessing either. Unlike his lieutenant, Venkataratnam Naidu, whose oratory in English was a legend in his life-time, Veeresalingam was no spellbinder on the platform. His voice was shrill and squeaky and he was admittedly less fluent with his tongue

than with his pen. And his exercises in speaking were often interrupted by prolonged spells of cough.

Veeresalingam's irascible temper lent a new edge to his righteous indignation against the social evils of his day. He was always an angry man, angry old man as well as angry young man, who could never tolerate injustice or corruption, superstition or slavery of the mind.

If he did not rely on himself as a ready speaker, he wrote down his speeches, packing them with all the arguments and illustrations that might have possibly eluded him in an extempore performance. As it is, his speeches were little different from his essays, and both of them were reproduced in his journals. They show him as a resourceful dialectician with a telling manner in social polemics. Surprising to contemplate, at this distance of time, the attention and response he used to command for his manuscript eloquence.

The enlightened people of his day could hardly afford to ignore Veeresalingam's radical approach to social problems or his fiery earnestness of purpose, in pursuit of his resplendent vision of the future. When we remember the fact that his early background was entirely conservative, his schooling largely traditional and his birth was in the highest social stratum, not subject to any of the familiar disabilities, we might at first sight be left wondering where he caught this germ of social reform. The inspiration of the life and teachings of Raja Ram Mohun Roy and the example of Pandit Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar were undoubtedly there. But unless his own internal organism was well prepared to receive them, and respond effectively, little could have happened to him.

The typical school-master, especially the Telugu Pandit immersed in the outmoded literary classics, is not the sort that could be expected to bring a new insight or a sharp reaction to the social problems around him. But Veeresalingam was about the most untypical of Telugu Pandits. He questioned the very basis of the prevailing social practices of the day, including the marriage of girls at a tender age, sometimes to men of advanced age, often resulting in early widowhood. He did this largely under the focus

of the new light of knowledge coming from the West, through the medium of English education. He did not, of course, question the authority of the Vedas or the Upanishads or any of the religious classics venerated through the ages. He was too good a Hindu to do anything of the kind. He was pious in his own way. But he did question the sanctity of the superstitious habits and customs, and the obscurantist social practices continued under the supposed shelter of the unverified authority of the *śrutis* and the *smritis*. He was the educator, *par excellence*, in quest of truth.

Writing in his journal, *Viveka vardhini*, as early as February 1875, Veeresalingam (yet not 27 years old) stated the case for women's education in rather elementary and elaborate terms. In the course of his argument, which might strike some of the present-day readers as an exercise in labouring the obvious, he sought to counteract the familiar male-oriented arguments on the evils of female education, which obviously were frequently trotted out in his time.

Veeresalingam said, in the course of his reasoned essay :

"... There are some who assume that the only aim of education is to qualify oneself for a government job and therefore question the need for women, doing so. ... Why do you want education for women, they ask. By the same token, they might also deny the value of education for men, with their own means of livelihood !

"... Man could do manual labour and a hundred other things for his livelihood, without having to go in for education. If education is for enlightenment and cultivation of the mind, as it should be, it is as essential for women as for men.

"... It is an equally indefensible proposition that girls would be exposed to the danger of being spoilt by the sexladen poetic classics of old, if they are to be educated. It is the traditional scholars who are most exposed to it. But they are not known to be spoilt that way. On the other hand, our women are sure to benefit from a study of the spotless lives of the chaste women of our Puranas. The statement that

ancient Hindu women were not educated is not credible. Female education was not frowned upon by the sastras. . . . It was not banned by any of the *srutis*. . . Shankuntala is known to have quoted from the Vedic texts, and explained their meaning, in the court of Dushyanta. . . . There is little doubt that female education has the sanction of the *srutis*, *Smritis* and *Puranas*."

In marshalling evidence in favour of women's education, Veeresalingam draws attention to various texts including the life of King Bhoja, a reference to the erudite daughter of Appaya Dikshita (in the reign of Krishna Deva Raya) and Molla, the author of Ramayana in Telugu. He then comes down to his own times and mentions the learned daughter of Paravastu Srinivasa-charya, author of a pamphlet, entitled *Stree Vidyaa Samardhanam* (In Defence of Female Education) and others in the family of the renowned scholar, Paravastu Venkata Rangacharya.

Summing up, he underlines the conclusion that education had served to sharpen the wits of ancient Hindu women. He concludes with an exhortation to the public of his day to start girls' schools in large numbers for the education of their children.

In another essay on the same subject, published a few years later (March 1880), Veeresalingam rejoices to mention the progress made in the sphere of women's education, with the aid of the schools for the purpose, started by the Maharaja of Vijayanagaram in Rajahmundry and the Raja of Pithapuram in Kakinada and Pithapuram.

While commending books of general interest to women as well as men, he stresses the value of works on home science, covering such branches as domestic economy, midwifery and child-care, general medicine and first aid, specially for women as home-makers. He also mentions his intention to write in easy and simple prose on some of these subjects for the benefit of the women-readers.

Veeresalingam was never tired of harping on the vital role of women's education in the intellectual regeneration of the country. It was his ardent hope that by giving their women

good education, and benefiting from their wise counsel, where necessary, Indians would be able to recapture the past glory of their ancestors. It might have gladdened his heart to see the heights to which the leadership by Indian women had risen in all spheres in more recent times in this country.

The place of religious and moral instruction in the country's educational pattern is always beset with controversy. An impenitent moralist all his life, Veeresalingam had no doubts on this score.

Writing on the "Aim of Education" (July 1880), Veeresalingam said :

"There is no conceivable means other than love of God and fear of sin by which a man could be weaned away from the evil path and diverted along the right path. Religious instruction is essential for achieving this.

"As the religion of the present rulers happens to be different from that of the people, it apparently stands to reason that there should be no provision for religious instruction in Government schools.

"But the result is that this is doing no good to the pupils in these schools, who are turning atheist, ready to indulge in any evil deed, fearless of sin. In an attempt to remedy this defect, it will not be possible to go in for the religious books of the people, for fear of the differences among them.

"The only alternative left is, therefore, to impart instruction in certain basic principles common to all the religions, without specifically touching upon the tenets of any particular faith."

It should be easy to recognise the foresight of a thinker, who anticipates the problems peculiar to Indian society by nearly a century.

Was it Napoleon who said that a nation that does not respect its women will perish? There are others too, among the world's great, who take the status of women in society as one of the surest indicators of its progress. Veeresalingam laid great store by this in whatever he said or did. He is generally

accepted to be in the line of reformers like Vidyasagar and Ranade in his stress on restoring to womankind the dignity and self-respect that were justly their due. Maharshi Karve drew inspiration from all the three of them.

Vidyasagar stands unequalled in the depth of his classical scholarship and flair for interpretation to suit the changed times. But Veeresalingam easily excels him in his flaming passion for justice and fairplay. Ranade was a man of massive intellect and unimpeachable integrity. But his gentleness of temperament led him to personal compromises in implementing the principles of reform he set before himself. Veeresalingam was uncompromising till his last. Karve was a man of rare dedication to his chosen cause, but his range of vision was relatively limited. Veeresalingam had a broader vision as also a more varied achievement. He stands second to none as a herald of the dawn of new India.

The Enlightened Generation

THE LAST DECADES of the nineteenth century in India are justly considered by many thinking men as the Age of Enlightenment. They roughly correspond to the last decades of the eighteenth century in France, when Reason began to assert itself in the lives of men, leading to the propagation of the triple concept of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity. In India, it was the period when the educated classes began to draw their intellectual sustenance from such classics of English liberalism as Mill on *Liberty* and Morleys on *Compromise*. Their political ideas began to take shape largely in an orderly manner, towards progress on the lines of gradualness of inevitability and inevitability of gradualness.

The founding of the Indian National Congress in Bombay in 1885 represented the focal point of the political aspirations of the Indian people as expressed through the deliberations of the educated classes. It was only after prolonged discussions on the relative merits of the primacy of social reform and political change, represented respectively by the Indian National Conference and the Indian National Congress, that general opinion was found to be more in favour of the latter. But the former had its own redoubtable champions and a few eminent scholars like the late Dr. B. R. Ambedkar seemed, in retrospect, to take the view that the lost cause (of the Conference) was the better one.

Sponsored, as it was, by seasoned men of public spirit, who

were all enlightened liberals in social matters, the Congress itself was not averse to problems of social reform, though concerning itself mainly with political issues. Most of its leaders readily extended their support to measures like those relating to the Age of consent, civil marriage, woman's right to property, individual's right to the gains of learning in a Hindu joint family, among other things. Political moderation and social radicalism were seen to go hand in hand in that galaxy of Indian liberals from Ranade and Teleng, Malabari and Pherozeshah Mehta, Dadabhai Naoroji and Surendranath Bannerjea, Gokhale, Sastri and Sivaswami Aiyar down to Chintamani.

Veeresalingam, as a humble servant of the Government, was not quite free to take part in political activity. But he made no secret of the fact that he was in entire agreement with the basic ideals of the Indian National Congress. In fact he attended some of its annual sessions. Like most of its leaders, he had a deep-rooted faith in the providential character of Britain's link with India. With his ardent belief in the divinity that shapes all our ends, he gave expression to his gratitude, in a more effusive way than the sophisticated intellectuals restrained by the habit of understatement acquired along with their English education would care to do. There was no room, in either case, for doubt about their loyalty to the British crown, which was unqualified. Insistent avowal of this sentiment was one of the regular features of the annual sessions of the Congress. So was it of the political utterances of Veeresalingam.

In the course of his lengthy address on the ideals of the Congress, three years after the birth of this national organisation, Veeresalingam said :

"Had it not been for the miracle wrought by the British Government, bestowed on us in the interest of our country's welfare by the all-merciful God, would it be possible for all of us to meet here today with such fraternal feelings, fearlessly to discuss problems of political interest ?

"I tremble to think of the outrageous crimes committed by some of the wicked tyrants who ruled the roost before the British rule was established in this country. There was hardly

any protection for money, honour or life; the poor could never hope for justice which was always on the side of wealth."

He then goes on to dwell at length on the benefits of British rule, a favourite theme of his recurring in his speeches and writings. All the amenities of modern civilisation including the means of transport and communication like roads, railways, posts and telegraphs, are listed by him in minute detail. Courts, hospitals and schools came in for a good measure of praise. He emphasises the maintenance of law and order, which made it possible for members of the different communities to meet and exchange thought on equal and brotherly terms.

Reserving the highest tribute in his address for the English language, Veeresalingam observes that the intellectuals, of different regions and religious persuasions, are drawn to it like iron filings to a magnet. It had provided a common medium of communication for those with the good of the country at heart. The dramatic effect of the whole thing is best retained in his own words :

"What else could this English education be, if it is not a magic wand ? —It has filled this country with a new life. Is it not really the art of *Sanjivani* (bringing the dead back to life) under the guise of the English language ? Those who have tasted the nectar of true knowledge, right philosophy and human freedom, rained by it, are soon rid of the disunity, selfishness and fanaticism, born of their original ignorance. How can they now help coming together in brotherly affection to enjoy the natural fruits of human liberty ? Watching this invisible revolution in the hearts of men, I cannot think of it but as an act of legerdemain. What else need be said to prove the greatness and glory of the English language and the English Government ?"

After going into such ecstasies over the subject, Veeresalingam warns his listeners against going away with the possible impression that the English Government was faultless. Far from it. He is, however, certain that public opinion, as also public administration, in England had reached a higher stage of evolution than those in India. Referring to the growth of representative institutions in

that country, he feels that people's will has a chance of being adequately reflected through the proceedings of the House of Commons. He recognises the fact that the British monarchy was of a limited and constitutional character, with the real rights vested in the Ministers and members of Parliament, who are the representatives of the people.

Turning then to the state of affairs in India, he notes that there was little in common between this picture and that. He says :

"Owing to a belief in the theory of the Divine Right of Kings, we have been taught by our ancestors to obey the King as God himself. However cruel or tyrannical the King might be, the subjects remain loyal and obedient, without even dreaming of rebellion—Indians are known through the ages for their implicit loyalty to their Kings, irrespective of the latter's individual merits or demerits.—People in this country have never had any political rights in the ancient past. They are not, therefore, aware of the possibility of any liberty being enjoyed by them..."

Continuing, Veeresalingam underlines the value of self-governing institutions at the local level and explains the process of electing representatives to the local bodies and to the Legislative Councils in the provinces and at the Centre. The stress is on the need for unanimity in making representations to the Viceroy and in electing the proper spokesmen to make them. After surveying the various resolutions of the first three Congress sessions with approval, he commends the idea behind people from the different regions of India meeting, at one place, comparing notes and fraternising with one another. The very process of travel should widen their horizons, in his view and the habit of putting their heads together help creat a new sense of understanding and unity. The promotion of a cultural synthesis and the fostering of trade links among the various parts were also expected by him.

Patience was, however, his watchword, till the fruits of the strenuous labour were obtained. The growth of the influence of the Congress to a stage when its voice could be accepted as the

voice of the Indian people at large would be the signal for the demands being met by those in England. His accent was on the two aspects of public work undertaken by the Congress and its friends. One was to create a political consciousness among the Indian people. The other was to enlist the sympathy and support of the English people for the objectives of the Congress organisation. Both these things were effectively done by far-seeing patriots like Lal Mohan Ghosh and Dadabhai Naoroji. In his appeal, Veeresalingam urged the importance of communal unity.

'Loyalist' and 'Conservative' might be the words that strike the readers of this generation in their reaction to the political attitudes of Veeresalingam. But these attitudes were not the result either of lack of personal courage or of political insight. Though he was in the service of the Government, depending for his livelihood on the none-too-well-paid job of a school-master, he was not afraid to challenge the might of powerful local satraps from Deputy Collectors and District Munsiffs to District Judges and others much higher in the administrative hierarchy than himself.

Indeed, it required greater personal courage to doubt the honesty of a District Munsiff or otherwise impugn the personal character of a Deputy Collector than tilt at the distant windmills of an imperial Government. The former could, in all probability, do greater harm to a man near at hand who had the temerity to point the accusing finger at them than could the latter, which was an impersonal target. Though nominally shielded in his journalistic writings by a pen name or publisher's name, Veeresalingam ran tremendous risks in this game of exposing bribery, corruption and other malpractices. His loyalty to the Crown and his unstinted admiration for the British institutions was nothing but a result of honest personal conviction.

Patriotism was not for him a handy aid to easy plaudits from his countrymen. Never ready to sacrifice truth for the sake of popularity, Veeresalingam took an informed view of patriotism. He could never persuade himself to turn the Nelson eye to the

glaring blemishes of his own people for the sake of pleasing anyone. In his essay on the subject (published in *Vivekavardhini*, dated August 23, 1893) he gave a bit of his mind to those of his countrymen who presented their national defects as virtues, thereby trading in unabashed chauvinism.

Fanaticism of all kinds was anathema to him. He had nothing but contempt for those who indulged in flattery, to buttress national vanity. Veeresalingam observed :

“Vanity is always a sign of ignorance. There is no greater foe to a nation’s progress than its own vanity. If they have an iota of its welfare at heart, they will not mislead the common people by flattering their vanity. On the other hand, they should open their eyes by telling the truth and strive to lead them along the path of progress.”

Touching upon the popular national habit of glorifying the achievements of our ancestors, Veeresalingam remarks somewhat wryly :

“ If we have reason to be elated over the heights reached by our ancestors, we have equal reason to be depressed over the present state of their descendents. . . . Even if it is true that our ancestors were so great, we cannot now achieve a fraction of their greatness by boasting about it, but only by working hard for it. If we really want to become great, we must not only emulate their example, but enrich their heritage, and excel them in their achievements. . . .

“ . . . Neither our ancestors nor any other ancestors could have been omniscient. Only God is omniscient; not man. It would be sheer blasphemy to ascribe omniscience to the latter. . . . People can improve themselves only by following the good practices and discarding the evil practices of their ancestors. . . . Truth is God, not tradition. The truth of this statement should be implanted in the hearts of men. That is the first duty of all those who lay store by ‘patriotism . . .’

Presenting his own rational interpretation of the much-abused concept, he said :

“ . . . Patriotism does not consist in the glorification of

ancient practices and the condemnation of modern ones. It consists in the removal of the practices detrimental to the country and the adoption of those beneficial to it and thereby striving for its progress. . . . A harmful custom should be given up, even if it happens to be native; a useful custom should be embraced, even if it happens to be foreign. . . ."

This persuasive logic and freedom from traditional sentiment had its appeal for a generation of young intellectuals who kept the windows of their minds open to the refreshing winds from far and near. They were capable of judging things on merits, without being influenced by extraneous consideration.

One of the foremost among them was Raghupati (later Sir) Venkataratnam Naidu, who made his mark first as Principal of the Pithapur Rajah's College, Kakinada, and later as Vice-Chancellor of Madras University. He too was a moderate in politics and a radical in social matters, a cosmopolitan and a humanist. Drawing his immediate inspiration from Veeresalingam, he broadened his concept of humanism by drawing liberally from the mysticism of the Persian Sufis, the Romanticism of the English poets, the ethics of the Bible, the pantheism of the Vedas as well as the monotheism of the Brahmo Samaj.

A whole generation of youths with social idealism and intellectual fervour was in turn, influenced by Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu. They included scholars like Dr V. Ramakrishna Rao, teachers like Peddada Ramaswami and poets like D. V. Krishna Sastri. The ripples of enlightenment, starting from Kakinada, spread out across the whole of the Andhra region.

Two other distinguished men, very close to Veeresalingam, in this connection, were: Chilakamarti Lakshmi Narasimham Pantulu, the blind poet, and Rayasam Venkatasivudu, the college principal and social propagandist. Chilakamarti, who was a playwright and novelist, besides being a poet, is known for his famous lines about Mother India being used as a good milch cow, by the British rulers in the role of wily milkmen. He might, in this, have gone beyond, or away from the limits of Veeresalingam's concept of patriotism, but the first impulse was provided by the latter. Rayasam was a true disciple of his Guru, in his emphasis

on social education. Politically, he was also a moderate, who believed in deep study before active participation.

Moderation, in general, would, at no time, commend itself to the youth of any generation. Even less would it in times of political or social upheaval. The Swadeshi movement, sparked off by the partition of Bengal in 1905 under the Governor-Generalship of Lord Curzon, found its sympathetic echoes in all parts of the country, including Andhra. The fiery orations of Bepin Chandra Pal, who visited Rajahmundry, had an electrifying effect on the students, who were straining at the leash to protest against the government. They would not listen to the counsel of restraint advocated by Veeresalingam. He wrote as follows, on this subject, in his autobiography :

“... The young would not relish the words of wisdom from the old. They tend to dismiss the latter as the embodiments of folly. There were frequent debates of a heated kind on political issues between me and the student-inmates of my garden. Hardly ever did we happen to see eye to eye with each other. I was pleading with them not to get involved in political upheavals, but concentrate on their studies. It would be in their own interest to pass their examinations and equip themselves for earning their livelihood. My words had the only effect on them of their taking me for a man devoid of all patriotism. . .”

The pattern of Indian politics began to change rapidly since the Swadeshi days. Liberals of the old school began to find themselves out of step with the coming generations, some of them becoming entirely out of date. Surendranath Bannerjea was one such. B. C. Pal himself, the darling of the youth, at one time, was to find it hard, in the Gandhian era, to get even a hearing from the students.

Veeresalingam was spared this fate, mainly because he was never an active politician. His ideas, were formulated from the long-range point of view. He brought to public life the approach of a statesman rather than that of a politician. He thought of the coming generations and not of the coming elections. And those generations were influenced by him, indirectly though.

XVII

Harbinger of a New Era

AS A STICKLER FOR TRUTH, Veeresalingam strove for factual accuracy in the minutest of details relating to his own life, to the extent of seeming too literal-minded, at times. Never did he take credit for achievements in which he had no share, or ideas which he was not the first to think of. But it would be amusing to contemplate what he might have thought of all the things said on his behalf in the resourceful tributes of re-interpretation in recent years.

“Progressive”, “Radical” and “Rationalist” are but a few of the milder epithets used for Veeresalingam’s philosophy of life. If he was not actually called a “Marxist” or a “Communist”, attempts were not wanting to depict him as being close to this school of thought.

Progressive he certainly was in a general way, but he did not believe that “progress” consisted only in throwing all tradition overboard. “radical” is what we might legitimately call him as he was thorough-going in the advocacy of social reform. But he is not known to have questioned the fundamental assumptions of Hindu society, as an extreme Radical might well be expected to do. He only sought to cleanse it of the accretions of blind custom and unthinking habit.

If, by “Rationalism” is meant an adequate use of the faculty of reason in all conscious human activity, he was undoubtedly a rationalist. So is every intelligent man supposed to be. He did question all the Hindu superstitions that did not stand the test

of reason and discard the traditional practices that were frankly anti-social, in the light of modern knowledge. A rationalist he was to that extent—thus far and no farther.

To describe him as “a Rationalist with belief in God”, as some enterprising “Rationalists” had done, is a plausible way of looking at him. But, really it would only be to indulge in a veritable contradiction in terms. For belief in God is in itself primarily a product of faith, rather than of Reason. There were Hindu social reformers like Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar, who might be taken for agnostics, not having expressed any definite views on the existence of God. (Even this is denied by some of his recent biographers). But, Veeresalingam left his followers and readers in no doubt about his views on this point. His ways were even more significant than his views. He did nothing without acknowledging, which he did rather amply and effusively, the grace of the “All-merciful and All-pervasive, Omnipresent and Omniscient God-Almighty”. Nor did he ever prefer to take shelter under vague abstractions, subtle euphemisms or polite understatements on this.

“A sincere Theist” was how Veeresalingam chose to describe himself, in life as in death. That was the epitaph he selected for being inscribed on his tombstone, installed by the side of that of his wife, in the Ananda Gardens in Rajahmundry. And that would sum up his religious philosophy better than most expressions thought of by the latter-day evangelists.

God was not for him just a matter of philosophical disquisition or metaphysical disputation, as He tends to be for some professional scholars and intellectuals. Veeresalingam spoke of him as a constant presence, protecting him and guiding him in all his activities, public and private. As a man of frail physique, and a chronic patient of asthma, he confessed, time and again, that he could have achieved nothing without the firm hand of God, giving more power to his elbow. This was true of all stages in his life—of his youth and old age, of occasions of joy as well as of sorrow.

Describing the death of his wife, in his autobiography,

Veeresalingam recalls his own words on the occasion :

“Oh Lord : What a calamity have you brought on me in my old age ?” he said to himself, contemplating God.

To which there was an immediate reply, which he was able to hear clearly :

“Don’t you grieve over it, my child ! It was only for the good of both of you.”

Veeresalingam further recorded :

“Feeling that some one had come up (from the ground floor) to console me, I opened my eyes and gazed in all directions. There was none. Maybe it was all an illusion of the mind. But I was firmly convinced that these were only the words of God. All my grief vanished in a trice and my mind became perfectly clear.”

There was another instance, even more vivid, in the light it throws on his personal belief. In the course of a letter from Bangalore in 1913 (when he was aged 65 years), addressed to his friend, Kunduri Venkataratnam (father of the veteran author-journalist K. Iswara Dutt) of Rajahmundry, Veeresalingam said : “...God is indeed on my side. He is undoubtedly helping me. My salutations to Him. I give you here one instance to show that God Almighty is helping me. Though it relates to a minor incident, it has filled my mind with interest and enthusiasm.

“I had asked for a medicinal tonic from Calcutta, as a pick-up in my weakness. When I opened the packet, I found the bottle tightly sealed with wax. Unable to open the cork, I kept it on the window-sill close to my writing table. I was thinking of buying a cork-screw from the market in the evening.

“This morning, on my return home from work outside, I was busy writing at the table. It was about eight o’clock, when I suddenly heard a bursting sound. Something dropped down in my lap from above. I thought a broken piece of roof tile had come down, when someone threw a stone on the house top. On looking up, I found nothing wrong with the roof inside. On searching in the folds of my *dhoti*, I was surprised to find a

bottle-cork. When I looked at the bottle on the window-sill, lo and behold, it was lying open, without the cork.

"The weather was quite cool, when this incident occurred. I was absolutely sure that this was God's work and thanked the Almighty for it."

A scientific explanation for the actual blowing off of the cork would make no difference to us in having a measure of the impact that the incident had on Veeresalingam's mind. He was obviously a man of God. He was fully convinced that His will was being done at every step. He was God-inspired and God-intoxicated, in his own way. But not in the way made familiar to us by saints like Kabir and Tukaram.

Sincerity and Theism would seem to represent the true essence of his life and personality. He could never persuade himself to do anything in which he did not believe without any reservations. Once he was convinced about the rightness of a cause, he would put his heart and soul into it.

It was in the message of Brahmo Samaj and the example of Ram Mohun Roy, that Veeresalingam found the sheet-anchor of his own spiritual life. The Hindu gospel of monotheism, corresponding to Christian unitarianism, commended itself to those eager to reconcile the best features of the East and the West. The emphasis on the subjective element in the one and on the objective element in the other needed to be properly fused. The end of personal salvation, so prominent in one, and that of collective improvement in the other, have to be met. The call of the individual so sacred in the first had to be harmoniously combined with the demands of society becoming insistent in the second. And it was done with such inspired vision in Bengal by Ram Mohun Roy who blazed the trail for the rest of India.

In following this trail, Veeresalingam brightened the spiritual path in Andhra by adding the light of his own torch. The basic urges of his own religious temperament were met by the institution of congregational prayer, which was an inseparable part of the new church. He was, till the end, a believer in the efficacy of prayer, the rational character of his social arguments notwith-

standing.

The influence of the Bible is also evident in the evolution of Veeresalingam, who looked upon God as the Heavenly Father. The methodical ways adopted by the Christian missionaries, in propagating the gospel and saving of the souls could not have failed to attract his admiration. It would be no exaggeration to say that one could see them adopted in his own technique of propaganda, which was efficient, didactic, documented, always on a high key, and hardly relieved by any sense of humour.

Critics are not wanting to point a finger at his *Paadree*-like approach to the problems of social reform, of widow remarriage in particular. Some of them might be just those with a personal grouse of their own against him. Their criticism was that he tended to evince less interest in the welfare of the "reformed" families than in those yet to be "reformed". His reply to this was that some of the former families had a way of developing a vested interest in their peculiar status in society, encouraging them to exploit him and other friends, whenever they could. Even otherwise, human energy and individual resources being what they are, it was not physically possible for one man to continue to take equal interest in scores of families, expected to take care of themselves after the initial stages.

We might also remember that Veeresalingam was a man of comparatively limited means. He could hardly afford to be (half) as generous as Vidyasagar was reputed to be in his day. To this might be added the difference in their temperaments as well. Biographers of Vidyasagar tell us that he was generous to a fault and gave till it hurt. Veeresalingam had to be cheese-paring, for his very survival. Entries in his private diary go to show how thrifty he could be, to the extent of appearing to be parsimonious.

If it is possible for some to see in the diaries his natural flair for book-keeping, it may be permissible for others to note a certain lack of humour in his make-up, which is rather unexpected in a man who had strenuously cultivated the muse of comedy for years. He could hardly laugh at himself, if we are to go by the suits for defamation he had instituted in his old age against his

malicious detractors. Understandably, he had a case. But he might have saved himself a lot of bother, if he had preferred to forgive and forget. That he was primarily a man with a one-track mind could easily be imagined, when we grant that most reformers of the world were no different. Righteous indignation and a relaxed sense of humour are seldom found to go together.

In spite of all this, Veeresalingam cannot be charged with an inflexible mind, leading to rigid views on all things under the sun. In fact, he kept an open mind, ready to judge issues on merit, and change his views, whenever he found it necessary to do so. For the best part of his literary life, he was using the bookish but intelligible form of prose (*Sulabha Granthika*), though he was not against the employment of the spoken idiom (*Paatrochita Bhasha*) in his social comedies. A few months before his death, however, he happened to listen to a lecture by Gidugu Ramamurti Pantulu, pleading the case for "Spoken Telugu". He is known to have conceded to friends that Ramamurti had a point there. He did not stop with that. He agreed, at the latter's request, to become the President of the "Vyaavahaarika Bhasha Samajam", though some of his influential friends were on the other side. Once he was convinced about the merit of the cause, he was not afraid to be drawn into the centre of a raging controversy, not of his own making.

When we look at his life and work, we cannot but be impressed by the many-splendoured and multi-faceted career. He used the pen as the sword to cut away many of the diseased limbs in the society of his day.

While he compelled attention, by the power of his word, as also the volume and variety of his output, for several generations, in the past, he has ceased to do so for decades now. He shares the fate common to all writers with a definite social purpose in view. Bernard Shaw said of himself that he was not afraid of oblivion, for he would be happy to be forgotten, once his works had served their purpose. Judging from the reading habits, as of today, he had little choice in the matter. Nor had Veeresa-

lingam. He could never quite free himself from the habit of overt didacticism. The bulk of his work remains unread by the present generation.

Veeresalingam's ideas of social reform could be seen to be derived from the precept of Ram Mohun Roy and the example of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. But none can deny his originality in applying them to local conditions, nor minimise the elemental passion that he brought to the conduct of his campaign. His was a tireless crusade for sanity in social life, for purity in public life and for an outlook based on science and reason as against superstition and prejudice on life as a whole and its problems.

'Man-incarnate' was what the great humanist, Sir R. Venkataratnam, called Veeresalingam. It was also he who hailed him as the 'Conscript-Father' with a "catholic wholeness". Andhra Kesari T. Prakasam said of him that he had lived and died a hero. "Andhra Pradesh and Andhra people could not be what they are, if Veeresalingam had not arrived to vitalise them", observed C. Rajagopalachari. "The greatest Andhra of modern times", was the considered judgment of that perceptive critic of life and letters, Dr. C. R. Reddy.

If the women of modern India are able to take their rightful place by the side of men and reveal unsuspected qualities of dynamic leadership, not a little credit for this would go to the vision of far-seeing reformers like Veeresalingam. If religious fanaticism and social obscurantism are seen to be on the defensive everywhere, the battle for reason and commonsense waged by them had not been in vain. If Andhra society today is known to be open, eclectic and cosmopolitan, by and large, it is largely a result of the liberalising process set in motion by Veeresalingam and his band of social thinkers.

Appendices

LANDMARKS IN THE LIFE OF VEERESALINGAM

- 1848 (16 April) —Birth of Veeresalingam in Rajahmundry.
 1853 —*Aksharaabhyaasam* (ceremonial initiation into the three R's).
 1856 —*Upanayanam*—'Sacred thread' ceremony.
 1860 —Enters Government District School as a pupil.
 1861 —Marriage with Rajyalakshamma.
 1867 —First contact with the gospel of Brahmo Samaj through the speeches of Keshub Chandra Sen.
 1870 —Passes Matriculation Examination.
 1871 —Appointed Assistant in the Government District School, Rajahmundry.
 1872 —Success in the 'Translation (Lower Grade) Examination';
 —Becomes Headmaster of the English School at Korangi.
 1874 —Takes over as Headmaster of the Anglo-Vernacular School at Dhowleswaram—Performs *Ashtaavadhanam* at Rajahmundry.
 1874 —Starts a girls' school at Dhowleshwaram, the first of its kind in Andhra.
 1874 —Starts his journal *Vivekavardhini* as a monthly.
 1875 —Publication of the Tract on re-marriage of women by Paravastu Venkata Rangacharya.
 1876 (July) —*Hasya Sanjeevani* started as a supplement to *Vivekavardhini*.
 1876 (November) —Appointed Assistant Telugu teacher in the Government School, Rajahmundry.
 1878 (September) —Sangha Samskara Samajam (Social Reform Association) formed in Rajahmundry.
 1878 (September) —Prarthana Samaj formed in Rajahmundry.
 1879 —First lecture on widow remarriage.
 1880 —Stree Punarvivaha Samajam (Association for the Remarriage of women) formed in Rajahmundry.

- 1881 —Girls' School at Innispet, Rajahmundry.
 1881 (December 11) —First widow remarriage performed by Veeresalingam.
 1883 —Starts *Sati Hita Bodhini* journal for women.
 1890 —*Vivekavardhini* ceases publication—Town Hall, first of its kind in Andhra, built by the efforts of Veeresalingam.
 1893 —Award of *Rao Bahadur* title by the Government.
 1897 —Presides over the Godavari Social Conference at Eluru.
 1898 —Appointed Fellow of Madras University.
 —Presides over the Indian Social Conference in Madras, at which he was conferred the title of 'Vidyasagar of South India' by Mahadeo Govind Ranade.
 1899 —Appointed Senior Telugu Pandit at the Presidency College, Madras.
 1902 —Presided over the Madras Provincial Social Conference held in Kakinada.
 1903 —Presided over the Krishna District Social Conference held in Vijayawada.
 —Presided over the Indian Theistic Conference held in Madras.
 1905 —Started the Victoria Girls' School in Rajahmundry
 —Widows' Shelter Home started.
 1906 —Takes off the sacred thread and becomes an anushthanic Brahmo
 1906 —Hitakarini Samaj formed
 1907 —Visit to Calcutta, where he was welcomed by both the schools of Brahmo Samaj (*Adi* and *Sadharan*).
 1908 —Presides over the Andhra Parishuddha Asthika Mahasabha held at Machilipatnam.
 1909 —Starts Rescue Home for fallen women.
 —Meeting with D. K. Karve in Poona.
 1919 (27 May) —Death at Veda Vilas in Egmore, Madras.
 1919 (28 May) —Last rites.

IMPORTANT WORKS OF VEERESALINGAM

1. *Maarkandeya Shatakam* (1868-69)
Gopala Shatakam
2. *Rasikajana Manoranjanam* (literally, a delight to the hearts of men of taste), 1874.
3. *Suddha Andhra Niroshitya Nirvachana Naishadham*
(the story of Naishadham, i.e. of Nala and Damayanti, in pure Telugu verse, without the use of any labials in the vocabulary), 1875.
4. *Suddha Andhra Uttara Ramayanamu*
(The story of the latter part of Ramayana in pure Telugu verse)
5. *Neeti Chandrika—Vigrahamu* (part of the story from the famous *Panchatantra* collection).
6. *Neeti Deepika* (The Lamp of Morals) 1872-74.
7. *Sangraha Vyaakaranamu* (A concise handbook of grammar), 1872-74.
8. *Padaartha Vivechaka Shaastramu* (Chemistry)
(in the form of questions and answers), 1877-78.
9. *Braahma Vivaahamu* (literally, 'Braahma Marriage' listed as first among the approved varieties of Hindu marriage; a satirical farce), 1876.
10. *Neeti Chandrika—Sandhi* (another part of the story from the famous *Panchatantra* series) 1878.
11. *Suddha Andhra Bharata Sangraham* (the Mahabharata story in a summarised form in pure Telugu verse).
12. *Stree Punar Vivaha Sabha Natakam* (an incomplete play on the theme of Remarriage of Women), 1879.
13. *Vyavahara Dharma Bodhini* (a satirical farce on the activities of leading figures in public life), 1879.
14. *Ratnaavali* (rendering in Telugu of Harsha's Sanskrit play), 1880.
15. *Chamatkaara Ratnaavali* (A rendering in Telugu of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, 1880).
16. *Veneesu Vartaka Charitramu*—(a faithful translation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*), 1880.

17. *Rajasekhara Charitra* (literally, the History of Rajasekhara, a social novel), 1878.
18. '*Satyavatee Charitra*' (novel for women), 1883.
19. *Shaakuntalamu* (translation of Kalidasa's '*Abhijnana Shaakuntalam*'), 1883.
20. *Chandramati Charithramu* (novel for women), 1884.
21. *Stree Neeti Deepika* (Lamp of morals for women—collection of 100 verses, edited for use in girls' schools), 1884.
22. *Prahlaada Naatakamu* (play based on a story from Bhagavatam), 1885.
23. *Prabodha Chandrodhayamu* (Telugu, translation of Krishna Mishra's Sanskrit play).
24. *Maalavikaagnimitramu* (translated from Kalidasa), 1885.
25. *Dakshina Gograhanam* (play on an incident from the Mahabharata), 1885.
26. *Raaga Manjari* (translation of R. B. Sheridan's '*the Duenna*'), 1886.
27. *Satya Harischandra Natakam*.
28. *Dambhacharya Vilasamu* (a satirical farce on boastful orthodoxy), 1886.
29. *Apoorva Brahmacharya Prahasanam* (a farce on a novel form of celibacy), 1886.
30. *Kavula Charitra* (History of the Telugu poets), 1887-97.
31. *Shareera Shaastramu* (Physiology).
32. *Jantu Swabhava Charitra* (Zoology), 1888.
33. *Satyasanjeevani* (plays on the efficacy of Truth), 1887.
34. *Haasya Sanjeevani* (anthology of satirical farces), 1888-91.
35. *Tiryag Vidwan Mahasabha* (the great congregation of the Learned Beasts)—a farcical satire, 1889.
36. *Maha Aranya Pura Adhipatyam* (overlordship of the great jungle kingdom)—a farcical satire, 1889.
37. *Kalavati Parinayamu*—(translation of *Cymbeline* from Lamb's Tales), 1889.
38. *Raghudeva Rajeevamu* (translation of '*Pericles*' from Lamb's Tales), 1889.
39. *Satya Rajaa Poorvadesa Yaattralu* (adapted from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*) 1891-94.
40. *Neeti Katha Manjari* (an adaptation of Aesop's Fables, 1893-94).
41. *Kalyana Kalpavalli* (Translation of Sheridan's '*The Rivals*'), 1894.
42. *Jyotisha Sastra Sangrahamu* (astronomy in brief), 1895.
43. *Sree Raja Ram Mohan Roy Charitra* (incomplete biography), 1896.
44. *Stree Punar Vivaha Prahasanam* (satire on the remarriage of women), 1890-91.
45. *Bhoutika Sastra Sangrahamu* (Physics in Brief) (1904—1905).
46. *Sweeya Charitra* (Autobiography) Part I 1911; Part II 1915.
47. *Jesus Charita* (Story of Jesus Christ), 1913.

APPENDIX

48. Desiraju Pedabaparah ; a memoir, 1915.
49. Navyondhra Vjakaranamu (grammar of modern Telugu) (Inemplete) 1919.
50. Bammora Potaraju (essay on the poet of that name—1919).

JOURNALS AND PERIODICALS started by Veeresalingam :

Viveka Vardhini (started as a monthly in 1874—later converted into fortnightly and monthly, discontinued in 1890).

Hasya Sanjeevani (magazine devoted to humour) started in 1876.

Satee Hitabodhini (magazine for women).

started in 1883, discontinued in 1890.

Satyavamvardhini (organ of the Prarathana Samaj started in 1891).

Chintamani (edited by Veeresalingam and managed by Nyapati Subba Rao Pantulu, started in 1891, discontinued after some years).

Satyavaadini (devoted to the discussion of social and religious themes, opposed to the orthodox "*Arya Matabodhini*") started in 1905.

Telugu Zenana (not started by Veeresalingam, but closely associated with him, started by Malladi Venkataratnam, 1893; edited by Rayasam Venkata Sivudu from 1894; Veeresalingam was Joint Editor for some years).

Vidwan—Manoharini (Started in 1874 in Narsapur by Shujayat Ali Khan, a friend of Veeresalingam), merged with '*Viveka Vardhini* in 1875).

Journals which figured in his life and work—

Andhra Bhashaa Sanjeevani : Started in Madras 1871 by Kokkonda Venkataratnam Pantulu.

Hasyavardhini (Humorous journal started by Kokkonda in Madras).

Purushardha Pradaayini (Anglo-Telugu journal) published from Machilipatnam in 1871-72).

Amudrita Grantha Chintamani (started in Nellore 1885 under the editorship of Poondla Ramakrishnaiah).

Satyaanveshi (started in Rajahmundry in 1872).

Hindu Jana Samskarini (published from Madras under the editorship of Mannava Butchayya).

Arya Mata Bodhini (started in Rajahmundry 1905) Edited by Kasibhatla Brahmayya Sastri.

WIDOW'S MORAL RIGHT TO MARRY

(Extracts from Veeresalingam's Lecture)

Discussing the different aspects of the problem of widow re-marriage, Veeresalingam made these observations in the course of a lengthy address delivered in Rajahmundry. (The following is a summary in English) :—

.... God impartial has intended humanity in general to enjoy the pleasures of this world in equal measure, irrespective of their difference of sex. Important among these pleasures is the satisfaction of the sexual desire. As God Almighty, in his abundant mercy, has endowed women as well as men with the urge of sex along with that of hunger and thirst, it is obvious that it is His will that men and women should make themselves happy by satisfying it in the proper manner. It behoves us therefore, that the satisfaction of sex should be sought without recourse to illicit means, just as one should earn one's bread without resorting to theft. The lawful means for the satisfaction of sex is marriage.

Conquest of desire is not possible for every one. However much we restrain our people and shower homilies on them, pointing to them the rewards of Heaven, we cannot suppress the natural human instinct, which is bound to find an outlet of some kind or the other. Even the great sages of the forest, knowing all and renouncing everything in the world, surviving only on roots and fruits, in a regimen of austerity, are known at times to have given way to the old instinct and thrown discretion to the winds. How then could the ordinary mortals in their youth, ever immersed in the pleasure of domestic life, be expected to rise above this instinct ?

The minds of even the wisest of scholars flutter like a feeble flame against the strong wind unable to withstand the attacks of Cupid. Then what about the plight of the poor young widowed girls? Disfigure them you may by having their heads shorn, divest them of their ornaments, starve them on a subsistence diet and mortify the flesh in many other ways, but you cannot remove the sex instinct for it is given to them by God.

If it be taken for God's will that a man in his prime who loses his wife should take another as he does not lose his manhood, even so, should it not be equally taken for God's will that a woman losing her husband should marry again as she has not lost her womanhood? How can you hope to succeed in working against the will of God? How can you thus hope to attain the pleasures of this world and the other? . . . Is it not an act of sin for us to work hard for the unhappiness of those whom God had meant to be happy? . . .

. . . The hardships of our child widows have moved even the visitors from other countries to a sense of dedication to the cause of improving their lot. How, then, are you, their own countrymen, living as in a single family, able to steel your hearts to their suffering? . . . Are you not able to see that these hapless creatures, denied the legitimate outlet for satisfying the basic urge, are falling a prey to the evil of illicit sex, the worst of all (social) evils? It is possible that three out of every four suicides of the world are traceable to this evil of illicit sex.

. . . Any lapse from virtue on the woman's part is a matter of unending shame not only to the husband, the parents and other relatives, but to the whole community as well. We, therefore, see how some men of honour, faced with a disgrace of this kind caused by any female member of the family, do not rest content until they see her end or the end of the erring man on the other side and are not afraid of courting the highest penalty of the law of the land, in the process. How many unfortunate widows are not there, who had been driven to suicide, unable to stand the slings and arrows of insinuating relatives, once their lapses are

uncovered ?

Looking back on all these things, are you not able to realise that the very act of preventing a lawful remarriage is leading to the hateful transactions of illicit sex, followed by murders among men and suicides among women ? You are all proud to claim your descent from the great Aryan ancestors, to whom goes the credit of formulating the laws of morality for the common good and leading the people along the path lighted by those laws. Is it not a matter of disgrace that you now prefer to disregard those very laws that sanction the remarriage of women in preventing the hapless widows from marrying again and denying the only prospect of their redemption, and subjecting them to a variety of tortures, thereby relegating them to a life of shame, far worse than that of the professional prostitutes ?

To say that such an inhuman act is essential for ensuring one's happiness in the next world is nothing but a blasphemy against God, against truth and against justice. All this harm is caused in our country when people pin their faith to a longstanding custom and not to God, truth or justice and learn to take its basic inhumanity for granted by dint of usage. Once we give up this adherence to a custom which has the great power, through constant familiarity, to present evil as good and exploitation as justice, and begin to have faith in Truth, exploitation and sin will disappear in no time. . . .

By our agreeing to the remarriage of widows, we only do them good without doing anybody any harm. By opposing it we do nothing but betray our own sense of jealousy. If we cannot persuade ourselves to be considerate to these poor girls, who are our own children, how could we have the face to approach God Almighty to forgive us of our sins day after day ?

. . . Did our ancestors ever hesitate to change the old practices whenever they proved harmful ? . . . As the remarriage of women has behind it the sanction of all the *Dharma Sastras*, it is for us now only to resuscitate a law neglected in favour of usage. Don't you imagine, for a moment, that you would be doing noth-

ing for these helpless widows by going against custom and usage. There is a lot that we could do. Truth and the moral law are stronger than kings and armies, money and other resources.

...Relying on Truth and Justice,, after realising the inner weakness of cruelty and injustice, let us strive for the establishment of the moral law.Listen to the voice of your conscience. If you are able to give up the misplaced faith in the virtue of *status quo*, Providence will lead you along the path of Truth for the greater good of your country as well as of your own selves... !

EDUCATING THE MASTERS

(The following is the text of the presidential address delivered by Veeresalingam at the Twelfth Social Conference held in Madras in 1898)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I consciously feel that I, an humble and incompetent individual, am not worthy of the position which has been thrust on me and which has been filled with credit at the previous Conferences by eminent and worthy gentlemen with whom I hardly bear any comparison. I wish your selection had fallen on an abler person. As it is, however, your pleasure that I should occupy the chair, I heartily thank you for the honour you have conferred on me.

We are met here to consider questions of the gravest importance to our society and hence to the commonwealth; for, I believe the political development of a country must largely depend upon the social condition of the community which supplies the physical, intellectual and moral resources of the people. The real work of improving our social environment undoubtedly lies outside Conferences of this kind, but meetings, discussions and resolutions are also necessary to prepare the ground and to fill the moral atmosphere of the community with ideas, which when they enrich the blood of the people, will stimulate them to action.

I have myself always endeavoured in my own humble way to work on the plan which makes action follow as closely as possible upon the heels of conviction. I may therefore be pardoned for the observation that discussions and resolutions do not by any

means exhaust the real work of social or any kind of reform, although they have their own part to play in the grand drama of the evolution of humanity.

I understand that the methods of physical science have influenced all departments of modern thought in the West. My acquaintance with the physical sciences is not as wide as I should have liked it to be, but as far as I am able to judge, men of science work on the principle that true knowledge must be based on experiment and observation. I fancy that that wonderful engine which has brought many of you across hundreds of miles from the various parts of this vast continent was not devised by a single effort of imagination, but its evolution was a slow process in which hundreds of trials had to be made with patience and perseverance by as many brains and hands.

The electricians who have harnessed lightning to drag the tram-car, though by no means at lightning speed in our city, did not, I conceive, rely on mere *a priori* speculations as to how the development of the electrical science ought to proceed, but they had to make innumerable trials patiently and perseveringly.

And if patient and plodding work is necessary in the domain of physical science where the laws which the elements obey are more easily ascertainable, patient and plodding, and often painful, work is still more necessary for social reform, inasmuch as the laws of the human mind and of human society are more difficult to understand and more difficult to be made the basis of any dogmatic theory.

I have sometimes been bewildered by the discussions in newspapers about what are called methods of social reform. That bewilderment is no doubt largely explained by the fact that I am not competent to grasp the latest sociological discoveries of Western savants, but I must confess that I have generally missed in these discussions any reference to the efforts made by the disputants to check their theories by this experience.

Patient, honest and intelligent work is not only the one indispensable condition of the success of the social reform movement, but it is also the only safeguard against errors of judgment and

the results of preconceived theories. The work cannot, of course, be done in annual meetings like the Conference, but as I said before, meetings of this kind have also an important function to perform in the economy of the social reform movement.

It should not be necessary in the twelfth Conference, and it would be presumptuous in an unsophisticated individual like me to attempt to set forth the objects which may be served by a Conference like this. But as I laid some stress on the work that has to be done outside the Conference, I wish to be permitted to point out that these annual meetings contribute in an eminent degree to keep the ideas of reform, as it were, in the air. That in itself is insufficient, and forms no part of the work of social reform, but it forms a material part of the means of reform. You often hear it stated that the Conference is all talk, and that nothing will come of it but mere waste of breath.

I hope nobody will accuse me of fondness for hearing my own voice, for I seldom speak in public, but it seems to me that those who regard these Conferences as a mere *tamasha* take altogether a narrow view of the imperceptible influence of such gatherings. The annual Conference should certainly be supplemented by the activity of smaller local bodies working throughout the year. Without such activity the Conference will sooner or later begin to suffer from the effects of inanition. But while I think that the Conference must have a large number of feeders, the annual gathering itself will rest on those feeders and serve to combine them into one harmonious system of organisation.

The conference may thus be reckoned among the educative agencies which make for reform. You often hear it stated that education is the best remedy for the evils from which our society is suffering. If by education you mean that which is imparted in your schools and colleges, this statement does not express the whole truth, and our educated men themselves will bear out the truth of my remark, for, we know the majority of our educated men are as backward in espousing the cause of social reform in practice as their uneducated countrymen.

Then again, observation will reveal to you communities in

which education has made such great progress that there is hardly a man in them who is unable to read and write, and yet which would not give admission into society to an England-returned man, and much less to a re-married widow. A friend was telling me the other day that a well-known local Hindu gentleman of great age and experience was once bitterly remarking to him that education, while it makes good men better, makes bad men worse. This epigram, like others of its kind, must, no doubt, be accepted with a good deal of reservation; but observation will show you that literary education is often a double-edged weapon.

For your purpose, this education, which makes men think and undoubtedly prepares the ground, must be supplemented first, by a familiarity with the ideas of reform, and secondly, by the influence of personal example. But personal example cannot, of course, be set in annual meetings. These can only help to render the right kind of ideas more familiar to the people. These Conferences, therefore, have an important function to perform.

The subjects which you have to consider, though generally called social, relate to the individual and to the family, as well as to society at large. The questions of temperance, purity and perhaps of female education may be said to primarily relate to the individual. The questions of child-marriage, widow-marriage and others of that kind may be said to relate to the family. The elevation of the depressed classes, inter-marriage between subjects, foreign travel, religious endowments, and such other subjects may be said to affect the society at large. But all these questions are intimately connected with one another. For, what affects the individual affects the family and what affects the family must affect society.

It is not for me now to speak on any of the particular subjects which you may discuss. I have no doubt that the various speakers will do ample justice to the several subjects which are entrusted to them and discuss them with maturity of judgment, fairness of reasoning, but coupled with courage and enthusiasm for the cause they uphold.

There is one matter to which I should like to refer before I

conclude. The President of last year's Conference expressed an opinion that your Madras friends "promise ere long to my mind to be the exemplars and the models of earnest workers for the rest of India," and similar compliments have paid from time to time, been to us by our kind friends in other parts of India.

I am afraid, however, that the notions which seem to be entertained in other parts of India about our activity and earnestness, are very much exaggerated. My friends may not thank me if I dispel that illusion about Madras, and it may even be quoted as another instance of the iconoclastic tendencies of social reform.

But if truth must be told, we in Madras, are as earnest, or as apathetic as our brethren elsewhere. There is as much of vacillation and temporising here as in other places. We are as fond of inventing false theories and lame excuses to justify our conduct as people elsewhere. We undertake difficult schemes as hastily, and fail in them as woefully, as perhaps in other parts of the country.

In these circumstances, to accept all the kind encomiums which are now and then showered upon us for our earnestness, will go to prove that we are neither earnest nor honest. We may have more to learn from you than you say you have to learn from us. A any rate, let us all learn from one another, and help and encourage one another.

THE LAST APPEAL

In the course of what he described as his 'last appeal' to the people of Andhra in general and the citizens of Rajahmundry in particular (appended at the end of the second volume of his *Autobiography* (published in 1915), Vceresalingam said :

...For the nation's progress, the task of reform should pay equal attention to all aspects of life and not confine itself to one of them only. One-sided development cannot be equated with true progress. I had long been trying my best in the past through my lectures to bring home this truth firmly to the minds of our people. But not content with this, I am now reiterating it for your consideration. Just as the isolated development of the stomach or the hand in the human body is considered a sign of ill-health, even so in human society the concentration of attention on the importance of political freedom, to the neglect of social and humanitarian work, cannot be regarded as contributing to complete happiness.

Even if we were to obtain complete political freedom, which would assure for us all amenities, how could we possibly enjoy any happiness at home, as long as we are slaves to the evil practices of caste and tradition? We are unable to give any freedom to our own children, but stand idly by when they suffer helpless widows. It is only when we are able to free ourselves from the slavery on both the fronts that we could hope to enjoy unalloyed happiness. If, therefore, we are truly mindful of the nation's welfare, we should strive for attaining all the aspects of freedom, without neglecting any one of them. Only then could we make the country full of joy, happiness and progress.

Now, the people of Andhra had awakened from the age-long

slumber and are working with great enthusiasm in the different fields for the progress of the country—which fills me with great joy Time was when the mere mention of the topic of women's education used to rouse the ire of the people in general. Now, there are girls' schools everywhere and women's education has made such rapid headway that many women there are, who are able to speak in public and publish their own books.—Then there were no suitable books in the Indian languages even for men to read; now there are organisations to encourage the writing of books not only for men but for women as well. . . . The widespread public enthusiasm evident in this year's conference at Bapatla and elsewhere vividly reflects the maturity of judgment and love of new movements among our people. Even so, in matters social and cultural, their words are not adequately matched by their deeds, at least to the full extent of my own expectations.

In these movements, there are some which require more words than deeds; others require more deeds than words. The striving for political reform belongs to the first category, the task of social reform belongs to the second. The second involves harder labour than the first. Of the two, social reform lies in our hands; political reform is in the hands of the rulers. If we make an attempt, we are sure to attain success in social reform, as it is in our control. We cannot be so sure of success in political reform as it is beyond our control. Only by fearlessly pursuing an object, which is within our powers could we demonstrate our integrity and honesty to the world outside.

I would, therefore, appeal respectfully to our people not to neglect the task of social reform in their enthusiasm for the cause of political freedom. To the educated people, I submit that the fruits of political freedom to be given by the rulers can hardly be enjoyed with any peace of mind unless and until our social condition is improved first. It is for you (the educated people) to establish this truth in your minds and pay equal attention to the problem of social reform. It never occurs to them to work for the eradication of the social or other evils

around us. It occurs to them only to be resourceful in running down those who do...

Newspaper correspondents seem to be engaged in a spectacle of those occupying positions of official responsibility getting rich by graft. Their eloquence is limited to their ability in running down those who honestly struggle day and night, according to their best lights. It never occurs to them to work for the eradication of the social or other evils around us. It occurs to them only to be resourceful in running down those who do.... Solid deeds, not empty words, are what our country needs now for its progress.

Among the organisations in Andhra now engaged in social and humanitarian work, the Hitakarini Samaj of Rajahmundry could be said to be the most important. All the means at my command have been placed at its disposal, but they are scarcely enough to cover its expenses. ... Any help extended to the society founded by me is dearer to me than any good done to me in person. By keeping the society alive and strengthening it, you are doing a good turn not to me alone but to the whole of Andhra desa.

.....May God Almighty grant you all prosperity! Oh, Guardian of all devotees! Protector of the helpless! In my present state of helplessness, I pray that Andhradesa might progress from strength to strength. May God grant my prayer.

Expressing his feeling of thankfulness to Lord Almighty for having enabled him to complete his Autobiography Veeresalingam said in a note at the close of his autobiography:

I tender my grateful thanks to you for having blessed me with the health of mind and strength of body enabling me to complete this work in my old and enfeebled state. I pray that you accept these thanks from the servant who has none else to protect him with your embracing love.

Oh, the All Merciful! Boundless is the grace you have been showing this unworthy son of yours from the beginning. It was not with my intrinsic ability but by the strength of your blessing that I have been able to achieve this work. If there be any thing worthy in all the things that I had done, all that is only God-inspired, reflecting your greatness. Among them, the blame for those unjust or irregular acts, not pleasing to God, is exclusively mine. For these

irregularities, born of ignorance, I crave your paternal indulgence and protection.

You have until now been the unfailing source of courage in times of anxiety. May you grant that the same courage and devotion and faith in you do not fail me in the days to come. May you grant that my mind sticks to the path of good deeds without ever being allowed to stray towards evil.

In my autobiography I had, all the while endeavoured to write nothing but what I consider the truth having you uppermost in my mind. Even so it is but human to err. If as a consequence there be any mistakes, arising from the prejudices and predilections hidden from me in the recesses of my heart may I be granted the good sense to correct them after acknowledging my debt of gratitude to those who might point them out to me.

I do not think that I have in this book indulged in any self-praise or criticism of others as of set purpose, If however, there be any such in the view of others I can crave their generous indulgence.

Oh Lord, Almighty! May you remove all selfishness from my mind; Grant the right impulse to work always for a good cause, and to the best of my ability, banishing all the indolence which I feel unable to get over because of my feeble health.

Oh, Protector of the Meek: If it be your pleasure to keep me, the helpless one, longer in this world, may You grant me the health and wealth, and the will to work in a useful cause, without letting me waste what remains of my life.

HIS CONTEMPORARIES

Venkataratnam Pantulu Kokkonda (1842—1915)

Renowned classical scholar of his day, whose purism in speech was proverbial. Was involved in literary controversies with scholars like Vedam Venkataraya Sastri and others, besides Veeresalingam. Author of a laudatory work in verse on Queen Victoria. Other works include *Bilweswareeyam*, *Korukonda Mahatmyam*, *Mangalagiri Mahatmyam* etc. Translated *Prasanna Ragham* from Sanskrit. Honoured with the title of *Maha Mahopadhyay*. Retired as Senior Telugu Pandit, Presidency College, Madras.

Venkata Rangacharya, Paravastu (1822-1900)

Well known Sanskrit Pandit of Visakhapatnam. Learned Sanskrit grammar and Hindu logic as part of the family tradition. Poet and scholar in Sanskrit. Patronised by the rulers of Vijayanagaram and other estates in Andhra. Re-interpreted the Vedas in his tract *Veda Rahasya*. Defended the teachings of Hinduism against the attacks of Christian missionaries. Traditionalist with a liberal outlook. Honoured with the title of *Mahamahopadhyaya*.

Vasudeva Sastri, Vavilala (1851—1897)

Playwright and translator of classical plays from Sanskrit and English. First to render Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in Telugu. Also translated Bhavabhuti's *Uttara Rama Charita*. One of the

earliest graduates of the Madras University, he was for some time on the staff of the Government Arts College, Rajahmundry.

Venkataratnam Naidu, Sir Raghupati (1862-1939)

Educationist and social reformer, he was an ardent Brahmo Samajist. An M.A., L.T. of the Madras University, he was Principal of the Pithapur Rajah's College, Kakinada, from 1905 to 1919. First elected Vice-Chancellor of the Madras University in 1925-28. A scholar in Urdu and Persian, besides being an orator in English. Known for his ethical standards in personal life and human approach to educational problems.

Venkata Sivudu, Rayasam (1870-1952)

Teacher and social reformer, inspired by Veeresalingam. An M.A., L.T., he taught in several schools and colleges, retiring as Principal of the Venkatagiri Raja's College in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh. Founded the monthly journal, *Zanana Patrika*, in 1895, to promote the cause of women's education and published it for over a decade. Wrote his autobiography, as also reminiscences of Veeresalingam.

Venkataraya Sastri, Vedam (1853-1929)

Poet and scholar, playwright and lexicographer. Educated in English, he served for a quarter of a century as Sanskrit Pandit at the Madras Christian College. Wrote many plays and translated some from Sanskrit. His original play *Pratapa Rudreeyam* proved the most popular of his works. Edited many difficult Telugu classics with commentary. Crossed swords with the scholars of his day, including Veeresalingam, on literary matters.

Lakshminarasimham Pantulu, Chilakamarti (1867-1945)

Prolific author, despite the handicap of feeble sight. Wrote plays, poems, novels, biographies. An admirer of Veeresalingam. His novel *Ramachandra Vijayam* was inspired by Veeresalin-

gam's *Rajasekhara Charitra*. His traditional stage play *Gayopakhyanam* was one of the most popular of its kind in Andhra. A patriot and social reformer. His autobiography is a treasure-house of information.

Sriramu Murti, Gurazada

A scholar-poet in the court of Vijayanagaram (in the days of Anasda Gajapati). Translated Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Arabian Nights' Tales* in Telugu. To him goes the credit of having attempted the earliest work on *The Lives of the Telugu Poets*, anticipating Veeresalingam in this genre.

Subbarayudu Vaddadi (1854—1938)

Scholar, poet and teacher, he was one of the literary luminaries of Rajahmundry, along with Kandukuri and Chilakamarti. Among his devotional works, the *Bhakta Chintamani Sataka* was the best known. He rendered many Sanskrit plays in Telugu, of which his *Venee Samharam* (from Bhatta Narayana) proved the most popular.

Subba Rau Pantulu, Nyayapati (1858-1941)

Veteran politician, publicist and social reformer. A lawyer by profession, personal friend of Veeresalingam and colleague in his public work. Started a literary periodical, called *Chintamani* and helped original writing in Telugu by sponsoring competitions in fiction. A liberal by temperament, he was General Secretary of the Indian National Congress from 1914 to 1918. He was also a member of the Imperial Legislative Council.

Ramakrishnaiah, Poondla (1860-1904)

Pioneer literary critic in Telugu, known for his knowledge and objectivity. His *Amudrita Grantha Chintamani* published from Nellore, was originally meant for the printing of hitherto unpublished works remaining in manuscript form. But it provided

space for review of new publications also. A friend of Veerasalingam, some of whose works were reviewed in his periodical. Old files of the journal are now a fertile source of material for research scholars.

Brahmayya Sastri, Kasibhatla (1863-1940)

A staunch traditionalist, as also an erudite scholar. Diametrically opposed to Veeresalingam in his literary as well as social work. Wrote an elaborate critique of Veeresalingam's novel (*Rajasekhara Charitra*), which is considered unfair by students of literature. Tried his best to counteract the influence of the Brahmo Samaj protagonists as well as Christian missionaries.

Appa Rao, Gurazada Venkata (1861-1915)

Acknowledged as a pioneer of modernism in Telugu literature. Spent most of his life in the service of the Vijayanagaram rulers. Well-read in the English classics, he wrote most of his Telugu works in the spoken Telugu form. His prose play *Kanyasulkam*, written in the Visakhapatnam dialect, still remains popular. His *Mutyaala Saraalu (Strings of pearls)* and *Neelagiri Patalu (Songs of Neelagiri)* set a new vogue in Telugu poetry.

Ramamurti, Gidugu Venkata (1863-1940)

A dauntless advocate of the use of spoken Telugu as a medium of literary expression, he showed remarkable foresight and pertinacity in his campaign. Starting life as a teacher of History in Parlakimidi (Orissa), he evolved, in due course, into an adept in the Savara (aboriginal) dialect and finally emerged as an authority on Telugu etymology and usage. His arguments on linguistic matters were unanswerable.

Rangayya Chetti, Samardhi (Died in 1909)

Friend and well-wisher of Veeresalingam. For long lecturer in Mathematics at the Madras Christian College, he was also

known as a lover of Telugu literature. Encouraged Veeresalingam in his literary work as well as campaign for social reform.

Peda Bapaiah, Desiraju (1881-1907)

A pupil of Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu and a protegee of Veeresalingam Pantulu. Started his career as a teacher, but gave it up to become a full-time Brahmo Samajist. Respected by everyone for his spotless character, he did not live long enough to have his full impact on Andhra. Veeresalingam had a high opinion of his integrity and never ceased to mourn his loss.

Chintamani, Sir C. Y. (1880-1941)

An eminent journalist, born in Andhra but settled down in Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh). Had his early professional experience in Visakhapatnam and Madras. Became famous as editor of *Leader, Allahabad*. An active liberal in politics, he was also associated with the movement for social reform. Had great admiration for Veeresalingam.

Gavarrazu, Basavarazu (1855—1888)

A native of Rajahmundry and a lieutenant of Veeresalingam in his social reform and civic service. Starting life as a teacher, he studied law and practised it in the District Court. A man of upright character, he would have no compromises with authority. Was a tower of strength to Veeresalingam in his early battles. His portrait was put up in the Town Hall, Rajahmundry, at the instance of Veeresalingam.

Lakshmana Rao, Komarrazu Venkata (1877-1927)

A versatile scholar and linguist, who could be described as an encyclopaedist. Was the first in Andhra to plan the idea of a Telugu Encyclopaedia. Started the publication series called the *Vijnaana Chandrika Grantha Mandali*, with a view to bringing modern knowledge to the door of the common man. Veeresalingam's autobiography was first published in this series.

Lakshmana Rao was also responsible for starting the Sri Krishna Devaraya Andhra Bhasha Nilayam, in Hyderabad, which became a vital factor in the cultural and linguistic renaissance in the Nizam's Dominions.

Sastri, Pandit Sivanath, M.A. (1847-1919)

A close contemporary of Veeresalingam. Started life as a schoolmaster. Was drawn to the personality of Keshub Chunder Sen and became one of his disciples. Had to part ways with him on the Cooch-Bihar marriage issue. Was responsible, along with Ananda Mohan Bose, for the starting of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj (1878). In spite of his family responsibilities, he dedicated his life to the propagation of the message of the Samaj. Good speaker and scholar in Bengali and English. Respected as a man of high ideals and selfless service. Toured all over India, including Andhra.

Lakshmi pati, Bhishak Ratna, Dr. Achanta (1880—1961)

Trained in Allopathy but practised Ayurveda, in which he specialised by self-effort, wrote many books on Ayurveda. Associated with the *Vijnaana Chandrika Grantha Mandali*, publishing venture, started by Komarrazu Venkata Lakshmana Rao. Held Veeresalingam in high regard as a Guru. Treated him in last days in Madras.

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